

HOMILY SUNDAY 25-B
“Humble Suffering Service”
(Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; Psalm 54; James 3:16 – 4:3; Mk 9:30-37)

In the movie “Forest Gump”, Forest reacts to his childhood sweetheart’s rejection by running across America. He draws media attention and followers who think he has some cause, some wisdom, for them. Some run with him, looking for the secret to life that they think he possesses.

What do you think is the secret to the meaning of life, to happiness?

The gospel today suggests simply humble service of others, to the point of freely suffering for others.

This answer is the opposite of the mentality of our world. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous talks about the three great drives that lead people into addiction - money, fame and power. I think of them as the three “P’s” - possessions, prestige and power. These are the three temptations that Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry. He alone was able to categorically reject them and remain faithful to the Father’s will for him, to love humanity unconditionally. He did this through selfless service, acceptance of suffering and ultimately, the sacrifice of his life for others.

This is the answer to the meaning of life: redemptive suffering, selfless sacrifice and humble service. Jesus served others throughout his short life. As he put it, he came to serve and not to be served. He also suffered in many ways - misunderstanding, opposition, and torture. In the end he sacrificed his life for us. Yet his life was lived to the full – full of meaning, peace and joy – leading to the same for us, if we believe and follow him.

The disciples could not wrap their minds around this mystery. Even after Jesus warned them of his upcoming passion, they responded by arguing who would be the greatest. In other words, who would have the greatest power and the most prestige.

So Jesus explained further: “Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all.” To drive that lesson home, Jesus said something rather shocking - he took a child in his arms and told them that to welcome this child was to welcome him, and the Father. Imagine – to pay attention to a child is to experience the totally transcendent, omnipotent God, creator of all. How can this be?

The answer lies in the *kenosis* of Jesus, his self-emptying on the Cross, his passion that he tried to explain to the disciples. On the cross, Jesus reveals a God who lets go of all power, control, prestige and possessions. He reveals a God who is totally non-violent. This is an image of God that flies in the face of all the mistaken, violent images of God so present in our insecure, fearful and fundamentalist world of today.

But why would Jesus choose a child as our model? - Because a child has no say, no power, no authority, no possessions, no prestige in our society. Yet a child is innocent, simple, trusting, open – an image of God. A baby has the power to melt the hardest heart – the power of attraction, and that is the power that God prefers to use: the power that God used in Jesus' birth as a baby, and in his death on the cross as the crucified Messiah.

The power that God prefers to use is the power of the Holy Spirit called “exousia” – the power of powerlessness, of attraction. Those who understand this mystery, and enter into it willingly and in faith, can begin to experience God at work in their lives.

Faith is the key to this answer to the mystery and meaning of life. Faith that our happiness and a life of meaning will come to us once we can believe in the power of powerlessness, expressed through sacrificial, long suffering, kenotic, self-emptying love and loving service.

In a small yet significant way, I learned that truth as a university student. Being rather shy at that time, my first year was rather uneventful, hesitant and boring. The next fall, a fellow student invited me to join the college student association as social representative. That involvement of serving my fellow students led to a totally different, exciting and life-giving second year.

John Merasty lives in Pelican Narrows, Saskatchewan, where there has been no regular priest for the last ten years. Some years back he lost his son in an accident. He regretted that his son had never made his First Communion nor been confirmed. That bothered him for four years. Then his sister, who was living in another province and one of the few First Nations women involved with the Catholic Womens' League, sent him a box of rosaries. He and his wife decided to give them all away to those who were in Church the next Sunday. They themselves also started to pray the rosary as a couple every day.

During their prayer one day the inspiration came to start catechism sessions for those of all ages who had not made their First Communion, so that what happened to his son would not happen to others. They visited the diocesan center and got some training and materials. They announced registrations one Sunday and were overwhelmed when over two hundred people responded. They gathered a group of thirty catechists and started the sessions in small groups. Church attendance doubled as the sessions progressed.

Fr. Bill Stang, chancellor of the diocese, spent part of a week in the community before the date set for First Communion, working with them and hearing all the participants' confessions. That Sunday 167 persons made their first communion and now are preparing for confirmation. Because of one couple's inspiration and efforts to serve their community, the Church has come alive in that community and is helping an adjacent community to also get started. John experienced deep fulfillment and joy through selfless service, and is now taking a lay formation program in Saskatoon.

The Eucharist we celebrate today wraps it all up - we celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus; his suffering for us on the cross, all out of his commitment to serve humanity in fulfillment of

the Father's will - and he above all led a life that was full of meaning and joy, even on the cross.

So have faith in the call of Jesus, follow him in a life of redemptive suffering, selfless sacrifice and humble service, and you will have the fullness of life, without having to run across the country like Forrest Gump and his followers.