

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

June 30, 2019

1 Kings 19:16b, 19–21 • Galatians 5:1, 13–18 • Luke 9:51–62

I.

When I came here in 2014, in the first Sunday homily I preached, I mentioned the story of St. Benedict's meeting with his twin sister, St. Scholastica.

The two were engaged in deep conversation.

Hours later, Benedict tried to take leave of his sister in order to return to his monastery at the proper time, in keeping with the rule binding on monks.

She begged him to stay, but he insisted.

As St. Gregory the Great narrates the story,

“When [Scholastica] heard her brother refuse her request, the holy woman joined her hands on the table, laid her head on them and began to pray. As she raised her head from the table, there were such brilliant flashes of lightning, such great peals of thunder and such a heavy downpour of rain that neither Benedict nor his brethren could stir across the threshold of the place where they had been seated.”

My change of assignment from Sacred Heart in Danville to St. Benedict's in Richmond was like that storm: unexpected, but a divine summons regardless.

II.

Today, as I leave this parish for my next assignment, I turn to the end of that same story of Benedict and Scholastica:

“Three days later, Benedict was in his cell. Looking up to the sky, he saw his sister's soul leave her body in the form of a dove, and fly up to the secret places of heaven.”

(Incidentally, that's why St. Scholastica is depicted with a dove, both in her stained-glass window and chapel here in the church.)

Benedict didn't know it at the time,
but that meeting with his sister was the last time he would see her.

It was their goodbye.

Only later, when he saw her soul ascending to heaven,
did he realize the significance of their encounter.

III.

So often in life, we don't know the significance,
or the full significance of an experience, until later on.

I think that now, upon my departure,
I have a sense of what my time here as your priest has meant.

The readings for today's Mass provide a frame for this understanding.

The readings have something to say about bidding farewell,
about moving on, and about moving forward.

In the First Reading,
Elisha, the protégé of the prophet Elijah,
asks to say goodbye to his family.

That act of farewell propels Elisha forward in his prophetic mission:

“Elisha... taking the yoke of oxen, slaughtered them;
he used the plowing equipment for fuel to boil their flesh,
and gave it to his people to eat.
Then Elisha left and followed Elijah as his attendant.”

In the Second Reading, St. Paul declares that,

“For freedom Christ set us free...
But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh;
rather, serve one another through love.”

For a priest, leaving one community to go to another is an exercise in freedom:
being free to carry out God's work,
being free to care for the flock entrusted to his care.

That doesn't mean being emotionally detached as a shepherd,
or stifling one's affection for people,
or relinquishing fond memories,
or forgetting about challenging experiences.

No, these things propel a priest forward, as they did Elisha.

That brings us to the Gospel.

We heard the pivotal verse in the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 9, verse 51:

“When the days for Jesus' being taken up were fulfilled,
he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem.”

This is a fitting verse to have proclaimed as I gratefully receive a beautiful crucifix
from the parish that is on the altar today,
and which will have a place of honor in my office at the cathedral.

The crucifix, echoing the Gospel,
indicates Christ allows nothing to stop him from carrying out the Father's will.

The rest of Luke's Gospel, from this 9:51 on,
is situated within Jesus' journey to Jerusalem,
where he will die and rise from the dead.

Priestly life, and all discipleship,
is meant to imitate that commitment and determination.

It's not easy for me, or for any priest, to leave one parish to go to another.

But we do so in service to the People of God.

It's what I promised on my ordination day.

I too, must be “resolutely determined” to go to the next destination.

IV.

My time here at St. Benedict's has shaped me;
I will carry the experience with me as I move to the cathedral.

So, what is it that I've learned, what will I carry with me?

I believe that I'm a better, wiser, and more mature priest than I was 4 ½ years ago.

These are the results of having been your shepherd,
both in gratifying experiences and in difficult ones.

I've learned that God stands by us in difficulty;
he supports and sustains us, even when, amid storms,
we can't immediately detect his presence.

I leave with a deep appreciation and affection for the parish staff and deacon;
they have been my closest collaborators.

I'm also filled with gratitude for the many, many volunteers who support this
Christian community in its efforts to live out our faith in Jesus Christ.

I've been inspired by the holiness of you, parishioners.

I've been edified by the example of your marriage,
your rearing of children, caring for aged parents, and so many other things.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of your lives,
for having invited me into your homes.

V.

When St. Benedict realized what had happened to his twin sister, St. Scholastica,
he turned immediately to the Lord:

“Rejoicing in her great glory,
he thanked almighty God with hymns and words of praise.”

This is one of my final Masses here in the parish.

I too turn to God with thanksgiving for all of you,
and ask for his blessing upon you.