

“God’s Generosity and The Courage to Grieve”

Homily of September 18, 2005

by Fr. Aidan McAleenan

Last night, when I was in the middle of the Prayer of Consecration, I got to the part where “Benedict our Pope” and just when I went to say “Benedict” I thought, “Gosh, that used to be John Paul,” and that one thought threw me off so badly that I couldn’t remember the Bishop of Oakland’s name, when I came to pray for the Bishop. When Father Brian Joyce comes out to do the notices, what’s happening in the parish, the first thing he said was, “Oh, by the way, I received a call just now from the Bishop of Oakland, Alan Vigneron.” And I said, “OK. You caught me.”

This gospel is a gospel that kind of upsets one a little bit. Is there anybody here that this gospel doesn’t upset just a little bit? Oh, come on, please..... You heard “Oh, please!” last week from Father Dibble’s homily. “Oh please...” works here. We all want our full wage. If you got paid at a different rate for the same job, you would be upset too. But this gospel is not a gospel about labor relations laws. It’s not a gospel about the whole work world. It’s not a gospel about what is fair and just. We, in our tradition, have this wonderful social justice tradition of our church, which is a wonderful thing. That is not what the gospel is talking about. What we have is the incredible generosity of our God expressed in this story. God is calling us to this radical generosity, this radical inclusiveness. That’s what the gospel is about.

And it made me think, going back on the sort of farming theme, of when I was about twelve or fourteen. My mom was a country girl and my dad was a town boy, and so my mom thought it would be really good for the four of us, or the five of us (But the youngest was about maybe four or five at the time.)... She thought it would be a good idea if she sent us off to gather potatoes, or as we say “gather spuds.” So, off we go on a Saturday morning to do this. We all thought it would toughen us up and it would pay for something of our school books and what-not. So, we arrive at the farmer’s potato field... (We lived on the edge of town and our little brother had to come with us.) So all day we gathered potatoes. The big tractor would go up and down the field, churning out potatoes. We would lift them and put them into bags. I must admit we were not good at it. All the other kids around were very good at it, illustrated by their numerous bags of “spuds.” So, at the end of the day, the farmer handed the five of us a dollar each. Now, that may not seem like a lot of money to most of you but when you were about that age, back in Ireland, it was huge. We were thinking of all the candies that we could buy and we were just very happy with ourselves. I gathered more than my little brother who was five. I gathered more than what my little sister gathered. But you wanted to see the look on his face or on her face when each got that dollar! I was really happy to see that at that moment. And that’s the type of relationship,

when you love somebody, when you are with them, when you're in a relationship with them, a familial relationship, you are happy for the other even when they receive more.... just like the guys who only worked for an hour. Can you see the difference between how you would approach this issue, the wage, when you are in a relationship with the other? We are talking about God calling us into radical generosity, as he is radically generous with each and every one of us. We are called to be bigger. We are called to be more loving. We are called in the gospel to live out our lives in the bigness and the reality of his generosity, what he has done for us.

There's another great thing..... Oh my God, are you all awake?! This is a beautiful and a wonderful thing. This morning I also wanted to talk to you about something that is a little difficult to talk about. We have a grief ministry, and Paul, in the gospel, in the second reading, is talking about what death means and how death impacts us. All of us, in this society, package death up into a nice little package. We don't want to deal with it. We don't want to talk about it. And those who are grieving are left kind of out on a limb. In this past couple of years, I have lost my father, and last year, I lost my mother, and I lost my brother towards the end of the year. And I remember someone saying to me, "Oh, but Father, when you become a priest, you will have three angels in Heaven to help you." People say the most incredible things! I didn't want three angels in Heaven. I wanted my dad, my mum and my brother! It's really crazy when you hear things like this, for instance, when you hear of a woman who has just lost a child and someone is saying, "Oh, you have a little angel in heaven." She doesn't want a little angel in heaven. She wants the beauty of that child in her arms. You want your partner to be with you, your husband, your wife, your child. And the pain that occurs and the moments afterwards... You are alright when everybody is around you and then, when you have to close the door and you have to lie on that pillow on your own and you have those tears and you have to deal with that all on your own, then it becomes a whole different matter. And everybody, nearly invariably, is very uncomfortable with the tears, with the grief, and most of us really don't know how to deal with it.

We are told (The intellectuals tell us. The psychologists tell us.) that there are about five different stages in grief. Well I really don't believe that there are five stages because every single person's grief is totally different. Everybody's grief is unique. You cannot compare your grief with mine. I had a man a few years ago, in a grief group, who was grieving after his father after thirty years. He had never really dealt with it, and he needed to deal with it. He came into the group and he cried like a baby. And he said, "Oh I feel really bad because this woman was sitting and she had lost her daughter to suicide six months before." You should never compare your grief with anyone else's. It's a really bad thing. Each of our grief journeys is very unique and very personal.

I want to read you a little piece from this book by Paula D'Arcy who was here in the parish maybe a month or two ago. She lost her husband and child in a car accident. She talks about the incredible pain and the incredible anger and the incredible darkness that she found in her life after that experience. "I suddenly felt like a child. But the moment I decided to let go and allow grief to teach me, darkness began to reveal its hidden light. But none of this was accomplished

alone. Slowly, one by one, a company began to appear in my life, a very colorful communion of saints.” The “communion of saints” that I am talking about in our Catholic tradition and our grief ministry (We do have a grief ministry that does a lot of wonderful support in practical things.) but this grief ministry is a peer-based parish ministry that’s got six or seven other people, just like yourself, that have gone through this experience. And each of these people tells their stories from their perspective. So, the first night is talking about anger. Oh, my God! The anger that you feel when something really horrible happens in your life! It’s like my sister and I were flying back to Ireland and I was so angry and I said, “Oh my God, I just want this plane to crash into the ocean because I don’t want to go home and deal with what I have to deal with. I don’t want to go home to bury my brother.”

Sometimes you need to articulate those thoughts and those feelings and you need to put them out there. You need, with grief, to be able to communicate it out. You need to be able to work through it, because if you don’t work through it, it will take care of you in a very powerful way. You can anesthetize it with valium or any of these drugs, but it is legitimate suffering and legitimate pain. You can also do it with alcohol. You can do it by running away, by being very, very busy. But ultimately, you have to work through the grief. You have to do your heart work. You have to feel the feelings. Our bodies and souls are wired in such a way to take care of this horrible thing that has just happened, the death of a loved one. This is despite the fact that we all know we are going to heaven, and we are all going to see them again. But, in the pain and in the suffering of the moment, the feelings eat you up. It eats into your heart and it turns your life upside down. The best way to deal with it is to deal with it.

And I would like to extend an invitation for anybody here who has these issues going on in their lives, to come to our grief group. It is a peer ministry, of people like you and me. It’s seven weeks long. You will be doing yourself a real favor, giving yourself a gift by walking the journey of the heart with other people who are in the same space as you. We arrive in the final meeting at acceptance. But, you know what? The thing about grief is that it is so unique that you can be angry one day and all the way, you can be accepting it another day, and the next day you can be right back at the beginning again. Grief is just such a unique experience, for each and every individual. And so our group offers as a communion of saints, as a group of peer ministers, a hand out, a hand up, a companion to walk alongside with you and, in a powerful way, to walk together.

I pray that we imitate God’s wonderful generosity in our lives, and that we have the courage to grieve, when that need arises.

Today we must honor and stretch for our humanity. We must imitate our God to reach out for that humanity. As we approach this table of radical generosity of love, let us bring to the world what we have received.