

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

God had a purpose for that bell pepper plant and when I finally wised up and started cooperating with his plan, the plant produced some pretty good fruit. It didn't do me one bit of good to go out every day and try to make that bell pepper plant be a basil plant by pinching off its flowers. What I really needed to do was to make sure I kept it watered and fertilized so it could be the best bell pepper plant it could be.

Like my bell pepper plant, God has a plan for your life and my life. We can either cooperate with that plan, watering and nurturing it or we can wish it was something else. His plan is for you to become fully human, fully the person you were created to be, free and good. A person who loves Him and who works to make life better for the people around you. This isn't only a plan for heaven, for the future, it's a plan starting right now.

Following God's plan for your life isn't going to change you into something you're going to be unhappy with. It's going to make you a better version of yourself. You were created as a good person, as a person who loves God and who nurtures the people you love. God doesn't ask bell pepper plants to put out basil leaves, he's smarter than I am! So how do we go about nurturing our faith lives? Everything we need to get the job done is available to us through the Church. Certainly the Eucharist is a big part of that and so is Reconciliation. Daily prayer using whatever prayer type works best for you is important. Actions that help your neighbors, mowing the lawn of your neighbor who is having trouble getting it done, working the food pantry, visiting folks in the hospital, being friendly and welcoming people who have moved into the parish or your neighborhood, these are just some examples of what we can do to nurture each other and the wonderful thing about it is that it nurtures our faith lives, growing our spirits, which in turn allows us to put out more good fruit.

Everybody has a unique call because we're all unique people. You are different from anyone else here in the parish, you bring unique strengths and you have unique challenges. Your family is different than anyone else's family, you work or go to school at a particular place, you have a particular set of friends. No one else is like you and God is calling you to make your corner of the world a better place. You may be a tomato plant, I may be a bell pepper plant, the person in the pew next to you may be an eggplant. We're all different people and so our path to holiness is going to be unique.

Pope Francis just wrote an Apostolic Exhortation called "On the Call to Holiness In Today's World". Anything with the title Apostolic Exhortation sounds like it's going to be a tough read, but it's not at all. It's about ninety pages cut up into five chapters and it turns out the Pope is a pretty good writer. It's easy to read and he has some really good, practical ideas on how to live a holy life in this modern world. You can get it for free from the Vatican website, but I bought a book form of it for \$10. It's definitely worth reading.

One of the points that the Pope makes in his book, among many others, is that since we are all following unique calls to holiness, we're going to all do it a little differently because we're not all the same people and we don't all have exactly the same call. Some people like praying the rosary, some people like spontaneous prayer, some people like the liturgy of the hours, on and on. The way you serve your neighbor is going to be different than the way I serve mine. There's a lot of different ways to live a holy life.

There's a danger that this wide variety can lead to division within the Church but it doesn't have to. Our unity comes from the fact that even though we have lots of different ways to pray and to serve, we're all focused on the same end: loving God and our neighbor, the two great

commandments. How we choose to do that might be different but the goal is the same. We also have unity through the essential teachings of the church. We all believe that Jesus is the Son of God, there's no debate about that. We have the Creed and the catechism. We're unified by those beliefs. Unity is important, but unity doesn't mean uniformity. It doesn't mean that we all have to be the same which is good because we're not all the same. Unity keeps us from being divided. As Jesus said in today's Gospel, a kingdom divided cannot stand. Any group of people, a church, or a kingdom, or a country cannot afford to be divided because all of that fighting saps the energy and strength from the group like tiny little aphids sucking the sap out of a plant. One reason division happens is because we can get the wrong idea that the way we do things is better or more holy than the way other people do it. I might have found that a particular way of praying works really great for me and that everyone else needs to do it that way too. Or I might think that a particular social issue is super important and everyone ought to be as concerned and active in fixing that issue as I am. When two people who believe that way bump into one another, you've got the beginning of a division. I know a guy who loves going to the Latin Mass, he loves it so much that he drives forty miles to a parish that has a Latin Mass. You couldn't drag me to a Latin Mass. I don't know Latin and I like participating in the Mass. Which way is better? They're both Mass! They're both good! He can go to the kind of Mass he likes and I can go to the kind of Mass I like and we can be friends because we worship the same God and we're both trying to become better people through knowing Jesus better. The trouble starts when one of us decides that our way is better or "the only way". That type of spiritual arrogance is the seed of division. And there are so many things to argue about, some big and some small. When we run into these differences, it takes work and attention to look at things from the other person's point of view. But understanding how they see it is the key to peace and unity.

People we disagree with or that do things differently than we do are not the enemy. I've found that in general, people are good and they're trying to do what's best for themselves and their families. Living in a parish as large as ours or living in a country as large as ours is like living in a big family. It takes work and attention to maintain unity, to spread peace and goodwill. It's easy to convince ourselves that we're right, to only talk to people who already agree with us. And you might have noticed that there are a lot of people in the world, some of them with loud voices, that are more interested in arguing than they are in finding the truth. Sometimes I read something or watch something and afterwards I find myself angry or upset about it. I have to ask myself why I'm angry, is it something important or is it something that really doesn't impact me but someone's reported it just to make me angry or to manipulate me. It's not good to live with a constant low-level anger (or with some people, it's not so low-level), it saps our energy and keeps us from focusing on what's really important, doing good work. The enemy sows seeds of division, getting us to argue with each other instead of focusing on what we have in common. We can resist it though; we can find unity.

It's takes work to understand where other people are coming from, to see their point of view. We have to talk to each other and have genuine discussions, not trying to convince the other person or "shut them down", but to listen to them and try to understand why they believe the way they do. That effort is worth it though, because if we don't we'll become more and more divided. And kingdoms that are divided do not stand. Kingdoms who are united produce good fruit, but not all the same fruit, because that would be boring. No one wants to eat bell pepper for every meal. Well, whatever kind of plant you are, bell pepper or basil, I hope this Spring you'll unfurl your leaves, soak up the sunlight of God's grace and put out some good fruit. With all the talents and

strengths that are here in this parish, we can produce a bountiful harvest to nourish the Kingdom of God.