

Over the past several weeks, we have experienced the high points of the Liturgical Calendar. We've walked with Jesus through His Passion and death, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. We've received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and celebrated the birthday of the Church at the feast of Corpus Christi. In all of this we recall the richness of our Catholic tradition and now we look to put these gifts into action as we return to the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time. In today's readings, we look at the human condition and ways to receive God's gifts, of forgiveness, grace, and communion, to overcome the challenges of spiritual life.

In our reading from Genesis, the Lord says to Adam "Where are you?" Adam ate from the forbidden tree and committed THE original sin. Yet we see that God did not abandon Adam, rather He seeks to reconnect with him, much like the father did in the parable of the prodigal son, waiting and seeking his son's return.

Poor Adam seems overwhelmed, feeling something he's never felt before. He says to God, "I heard you in the garden, but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself." He's lost in shame, self-consciousness, and a loss of self-confidence that comes across as a sense of nakedness. But this was not a physical nakedness, Adam was feeling a spiritual nakedness after breaking his promise with God. Adam was in despair, we've all been there, so let's take a look at how he reacts.

What follows is a sequence of finger pointing where shame turns to blame as Adam and Eve pass the buck to avoid tarnishing their reputation and to avert God's punishment. Adam blames Eve, who in turn blames the serpent. Unfortunately, this is our human instinct when we are cornered by our sin, and we see it all over the world that we live in. This pattern of human behavior is being played out in the media, on the internet, and even at our workplaces and other human institutions. So how do we overcome this tendency and not let our sin put us in a tailspin of the shame and blame game?

St. Paul talks about unity and raising ourselves. He starts with, "Brothers and sisters, since we have the same spirit of faith..." He implies that we are joined by Christ and can form a sort of human ladder to pull ourselves out of this cycle of hate and discontent. He goes on to say, "Knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence." We received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Spirit Christ relied on to perform miracles and endure suffering. This is the Spirit that is ready to fill us, to break the shame-blame cycle.

But a challenge awaits us, a spiritual battle with Satan that Eve and Adam also dealt with. Jesus compares the spiritual battle with Satan to a physically strong man, saying, "No one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man." This involves looking for the strong man in our hearts, that's keeping us from letting God in.

The strong man CAN take on many forms. He can be one or more of the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, or sloth. It could also be the use of technology that dominates our lives in a detrimental way. Whatever the cause, a personal reflection on the question that God asks Adam, "Where are you?" (spiritually), is essential in fighting the spiritual battles in our lives, with the help of God's grace.

Jesus, in today's gospel, comes into the middle of the mess of humanity with his disciples, and models for us the work of building the Kingdom of God. They return from a journey, and the crowds immediately gather. We are told, "Making it impossible for them even to eat." We see this as an example of the Holy Spirit working in them, focusing them on the mission despite their hunger, and getting right to work where the need is most.

Next you see Jesus changing the game from the hierarchy of God, Adam, Eve, the Serpent to sitting in a CIRCLE with the people in the crowd. The crowd says to Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Then looking around at those in the circle, he says here are my mother and my brothers, for whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." He is breaking down another hierarchy common in those days, family comes first, then friends, followed by community. Jesus is teaching us to treat all people as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. Jesus is redefining community to break the shame-blame cycle.

Community is a strong asset of St. James, especially in our sense of welcoming. As we look around the circle of our fellow parishioners in this semi-circle shaped church, let us see each other as brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. Let's look to each other to support our spiritual growth individually and as a community.

The Church is full of examples of breaking down the barriers of hierarchy that Jesus preached. This weekend 4000 volunteers from our diocese are at Cathedral Catholic Church packing over a million meals for the poor in Africa and Mexico. Over 80 of them are from St. James, working together in circles of 8 people from various walks of life, filling bags with 4 meals each, in a conscious effort to reach out to those in need.

Another example. Next month, as part of the 3-year, Church-wide Eucharistic Revival, 80,000 of the faithful will gather in Indianapolis to pray to, listen, and adore our Lord. Over 80 members of the San Diego Diocese will participate, including my wife and myself. If you are interested in going, tickets are still available, and we would love if some of you could join us.

Jesus gives us the example and tools to break the shame-blame cycle, including grace, forgiveness, and community. With His Holy Spirit we can overcome our instincts, answer God's question to Adam, "Where are you?" (spiritually) and consciously engage in the next chapter of God's will for our spiritual lives.