

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It was a Friday morning at the Family Court in Rome some time ago, and I had about twenty minutes to meet him and talk with him for the first time before going in before the judge on the record. He was a young guy, maybe twenty. In the conference room with him, he was quiet and responsive, but seemed very tense...which is a normal expectation for someone brought to the high charged environment of Family Court.

He and his live-in girlfriend had just had their first child for either one of them...a baby girl born to her in October named Chloe. I looked in the file and noticed, first thing, that it was a neglect proceeding filed by the county's Department of Social Services against he and the child's mother. Without even looking at the petition's contents, I asked him right away, "Was the child still at home, or removed into foster care by the Department?" When he replied that the child was still home, I told him that was good, on several different levels. First, if she had been removed, my first priority at this first appearance was to work on a schedule of substantive visitation...especially for a baby so young who needs to bond with her parents, particularly if she was nursing. And second, if the child was not removed, the Department obviously had the opinion that the child was not in imminent risk.

This baby was born with a medical condition. A piece of soft cartilage near her voice box that caused her above-normal effort to breathe. And, as she was forced to breathe with effort, using more calories than normal, she was losing weight and not thriving. "Failure to thrive" is the code.

The allegations were that these young parents were not cooperating with the public health nurse, and were otherwise refusing assistance and services. But, finally in early December, Chloe had corrective surgery to remove the cartilage, was returned home, and started gaining weight.

Before going in, I told him that as the baby was now at home, the greatest pressure would be off. From here on out, our mutual effort would be to determine and arrange for supportive services that would strengthen their household. My message was, essentially....to relax, it is all good. We will work out the legal side, but your job as dad is to fully cooperate to keep the baby safe and healthy in your own home. Mom was hearing the same message from her lawyer.

Then we all went into court. The department's lawyer whispered to me, in going by to his table, that there was a confrontation between the parents and the worker very early on at their home, with my guy threatening a physical fight, and screaming profanities. My client wanted to whisper his side of the conflict...and my response was, essentially, I do not want to hear it because that was early on. That was then, before the surgery and acknowledged improvement of the baby's condition, and this is now...where we move ahead, with everyone consenting the baby is safe at home with services.

And, here I am, flipping to page 2 of the sermon...and, as of yet, with NO mention of God, or Jesus, or today's gospel reading. Well, no DIRECT mention. No chapter and verse. But what you have heard IS the gospel reading for today.

In today's gospel, Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother, and everyone tells their friends because it is so special. Jesus is happy to be able to heal but the healing is only part of it. The greater need, and his greater ministry, is to share the message of good news and, in today's gospel, he says that it is time to move on to the next town because "that is what I came out to do". St. Mark's story of Jesus says that was about sharing the good news that the kingdom of God was near.....meaning, "Life is hard, but God is good, and God is with us to help us live it."

When we give our heart to God, we gradually become changed by God to the point that, in our daily lives with the encounters that we have along the way, we somehow come to share that message of good news that God is with us to help us live it.

Some years ago, I had become completely worn down by the emotional toll of doing that work, actually telling Bishop Adams and others among the clergy who I confided with that "quote" it was not sanctifying "unquote". I have since come to learn how untrue and how wrong that conclusion was, and now I wonder at the foolishness of that presumption.

After all, we hear it here every Sunday morning...and it is a wonder to me how I could miss it because I am the one actually saying it...that it is a good, and right, and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to God. So, the point of today's message is to find how that happens, everywhere and all the time. To find that there is no disconnect. That everything we do in life that is positive, and fruitful, and joyful, and particularly helpful to others...all of it is sanctifying.

Because, in the words of Jesus, "that is what I came out to do"...and so, now, I am directed to look less at the self-focused stress of highly emotional situations, and now tend to see them more in the light of shepherding others through their journeys of fear..through the valley of the shadow of death...in that they are not alone, but have help. God's work for us is to help in saving people from their broken-ness and their troubles by reminding them they are not alone. That they are cared for.

All of the theologians since the time of Jesus have helped make all of this so tough, so convoluted, so difficult to understand...in the heart, let alone the mind. But, Paul...in a letter to his friends in the town of Corinth...keeps it simple in that he writes how he has to....has to...share the good news about Jesus, because it is able to save people from their sins and troubles. The way that we can also do that is to be the living, breathing presence of God, and do what Jesus and his followers did: live into and tell your own stories of life, and not of death. After all, "that is what I came out to do", he said...and the same for each of us as we continue in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.