

Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9

Moses spoke to the people and said:
"Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees
which I am teaching you to observe,
that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land
which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.
Therefore, I teach you the statutes and decrees
as the LORD, my God, has commanded me,
that you may observe them in the land you are entering to occupy.
Observe them carefully,
for thus will you give evidence
of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations,
who will hear of all these statutes and say,
'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.'
For what great nation is there
that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us
whenever we call upon him?
Or what great nation has statutes and decrees
that are as just as this whole law
which I am setting before you today?

"However, take care and be earnestly on your guard
not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen,
nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live,
but teach them to your children and to your children's children."

Gospel: Matthew 5:17-19

Jesus said to his disciples:
"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.
Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,
not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter
will pass from the law,
until all things have taken place.
Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments
and teaches others to do so
will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven.
But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments
will be called greatest in the Kingdom of heaven."

Homily: Be a Witness for Our Catholic Faith

We heard in our first reading today from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses addressing the people and saying, 'What a gift we have in this Law that has been passed down to us. It's a sign of the greatness of God bestowed on us that we have directives; that we have laws; that we have knowledge of what God is asking of us.'

That reading is paired with our Gospel today from Matthew 5 where Jesus says, "I'm not coming to break the Law, I'm coming to fulfill it...to understand its application to us in the particular circumstances of our own culture and in our own time." The Lord says, in saying that, he has not come to break it, but to fulfill it, and that that Law needs to be understood and applied in the cultural norms in which we live. It can't be rigidly simply written on tablets of stone. It needs to be written in our hearts and lived.

I was particularly struck by the closing paragraph of today's first reading from the book of Deuteronomy. Moses says, "However take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which our own eyes have seen nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and to your children's children."

There's a charge there, is isn't there? Remember them and pass on what you have learned to others. Do it in the daytime. Do it in the night. Even when the crickets are sounding; continue to pass this on from one generation to the next. That's particularly difficult for us I think within our own time and within our own culture.

As you know, I live and work in Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House. Virtually every weekend we have retreats and in the course of those retreats, there's an opportunity to meet with one of the members of our staff. There isn't a weekend that goes by where someone doesn't come and talk to a member of the staff (and I hear this week after week) saying, 'Father, I sent my kids to Catholic school...they are no longer practicing their faith. What did I do wrong? What do I do?' It's heart-wrenching because young adults today are leaving the Catholic Church in droves. It isn't just the Catholic Church, this is true of all the mainline Protestant churches and it's true of Jewish young adults as well. So many of our young adults today and so many of our older adults today, no longer feel the need for organized religion. They want to be spiritual, but not religious. Pray to God. Be a good person. Not be a member of a faith community.

"Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which our own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and your children's children." How do we do that?

There's no easy answer to that. There is no one answer that fits all, but there are three major pillars that I've come up with that I come back to again and again and again. Number 1) Never give up praying for your children and your children's children. Don't blow off those prayers. Take them to heart. Pray for them. Fast for them. Do sacrifices for them. If you can join together with your spouse, or if you can join together with other members of your family, do that. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered, there am I in your midst." Your prayer is not simply multiplied, it's exponentially more powerful the more people in your family you can gather

together to pray for members of your family who are no longer going to church; who are no longer practicing their faith.

Of course, the best example, perhaps, of faithful prayer is St. Monica who never gave up on praying for her son Augustine. Even when he was in an illicit, immoral relationship...Even when he fathered a child illegitimately...Monica continued to pray for her son Augustine. Eventually her prayers were rewarded.

The best way to get people to come to Bellarmine retreats is through personal invitation, which is number two. Not only pray for them, but look for windows of opportunity to be able to invite people into the faith. Sometimes people's hearts are just closed and I think you can read the body language and you know those members of your family, whether you're just going to anger them, whether you are just going to frustrate them and those are not the times to say, 'Hey why don't you come to church with me.' But there are windows of opportunity where the window cracks open and those are the opportunities to plant a seed of faith—a seed of hope.

When are some of those opportunities? If a person loses a job...if a person breaks up in a love relationship...if a marriage is on the rocks...if a person is going through physical or emotional turmoil. Those are often opportunities where we feel, 'I am not sufficient myself. I need some extra help. I need some extra prayer.' Look for those windows of opportunity not to be able to guilt them, because guiltting them into coming back to church I don't think ever does any good, but invite them.

There's been a huge cultural shift over the last 25 years from going to church for what some have called, 'fire insurance.' That is, 'Go to church or you'll burn in hell.' That no longer cuts it. That's not the Ministry of invitation. Wagging your finger and saying, "There's going to be hell to pay." is not the way we're going to invite people back to faith. If we make a case for what Moses is talking about, this is a way of living that brings life. It is not simply about fear of hell. It's not simply, 'Don't do this or God is going to be angry with you.' Jesus says, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full."

If your faith and your life sets your heart on fire, then share that invitation because life has a way of beating us up. Life is hard. Life is filled with struggle and no one escapes that struggle. Sooner or later, they are going to get slammed. Sometimes it comes sooner, sometimes it comes later, and it comes in all kinds of different ways but that we will be slammed by the hardship of life is inevitable. Look for those opportunities of difficulties and look for the opportunities of joy: the birth of a child, the joyous occasion of a marriage.

Those are opportunities where hearts are opened and we want to say, 'Would you like to come to church with me? There's a retreat that I'm going to go to. There's a day of prayer. This is a book that I read. This is a CD that I listened to. This is a DVD that I found really helpful. This is a CD of the music minister at our parish that I found really inspiring. Maybe you would enjoy listening to this music. Here's a website that I find really helpful. Here's a blog that makes sense to me.' Those are just little invitations that plant some seeds, that's number two.

Number 3) This is the most difficult but it's the most compelling. Live a life of joy. Practice your faith in a way that makes a difference, that stands out. There have been research studies after research studies and one of the most compelling things that brings young adults back to the church are mentors; people who live their faith—people who just don't tell others to do it: "Do what I say and not what I do." That becomes a countersign. But if you are inviting and you are living that faith in a way that shows that you are joyful, that you are animated, that your faith brings you into the depth of the fullness of life, that's compelling.

Young adults today are looking for credible witnesses. Their BS detector is on high alert. They are acutely sensitive to hypocrisy and to the gap between what we say and what we practice. The greater integrity we bring to living our faith, the more compelling is that witness. Our world is filled with hypocrisy in every level of society. I think that's part of the reason why so many young adults today say, 'I don't want any part of it if this is what it means to be a Christian. I'm sorry, I'm not interested.' The quote of Mahatma Gandhi, the great Indian activist of nonviolence, I think is strategic here. He said, "If Christians practice Christianity. If Christians practice what Jesus taught, I would be a Christian, but Christians don't practice what Jesus taught so why should I be a Christian?"

What a damning indictment of the way we live our faith.

A three-part plan: Never give up praying, fasting and sacrificing for those you love. Number two, look for windows of opportunity to invite them back into the faith. Number three—and most important of all—live a life that is a living invitation.

“...take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor to let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and to your children's children.”

Amen? Amen.