

October 30, 2016 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time 11:00 a.m.

St. Catherine of Siena Parish----Celebration of Parish's 50th Anniversary

My brother priests, dear parishioners who are here week-in and week-out, as well as perhaps some parishioners from former days returning for today's Golden Anniversary, as well as welcome to any visitors joining us from near or far-----all of us joined together, sisters and brothers in Christ! Welcome!

A parish anniversary is a really memorable moment in a parish's history. But when it's a special one like this is---the 50th anniversary---so special that we call it by the distinctive label of "Golden"—we know that it's an important time to stop and remember the past----take stock of the present----and do some dreaming about the future.

Not everything about these 50 years are "golden" in the sense of easy/wonderful/or positive. As with everything in life, the good and the bad both come our way; successes and failures are a part of our individual experience, our family life experience, and in our parish life experience as well. But what is "golden" is that as we give thanks for the past, the present and the future of this parish, we know that God's work is being done, and the Kingdom of God is being advanced here in this part of our Diocese. St. Catherine's Parish is older than perhaps three-quarters of the people gathered here for this Mass. St. Catherine's Parish is older than our Diocese; St. Catherine's was already five years old when our Diocese was established in 1971. And, another "fun fact", St. Catherine's is almost older than the number of years that Fr. Bill and Fr. Stan combined have been priests!

From our human perspective, 50 years is a half a century, and in anyone's book, that's a long time. But the most important reason why we are a part of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, or any Catholic Parish for that matter, is because we also need to live our lives according to our Faith, and as we do each week, by listening to the Readings from Sacred Scripture, we come to learn about "God's perspective"---how God sees us, and what God wants us to keep in mind---and in our heart---as we live our lives.

Today's first Reading from the Book of Wisdom helps us to have "the big picture" and to see our world (and our part in that world) from "God's perspective". We heard the sacred Wisdom writer reflect on God as Creator of all----and how, from "God's perspective" the whole universe,

which He created and sustains, is like a “*grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth*”. And yet, that very same, All-powerful God, is also revealed as “*the Lover of Souls*”, reminding us that He loves *all* people, including each and every one of us, and does everything humanly possible, and beyond what was humanly possible, to help us to turn away from sin so that we can live in oneness with Him and with one another.

And that’s what makes today’s Gospel story with which we’re all so familiar so significant as we meet Zaccheus---the first and only time that we hear about him in the Gospels, yet I think Zaccheus has a universal appeal---someone that we can all relate to. He was not only a tax collector, but the chief tax collector, and so therefore, the guy that everybody loved to hate! Even though he probably was a dishonest and a pretty miserable person---one who cheated and stole from everyone he could---St. Luke lets us know that Jesus saw something “good” inside him.

When he heard that Jesus was passing through Jericho, he knew that he just had to see Him; but he had a small problem---literally. He was a little man, or as we might say today “vertically challenged”, which meant that he would not be able to see Jesus over the big crowds. So, he decided to climb up the sycamore tree to get a better “perspective”. I’m sure it made sense to Zaccheus at the time---figuring that no one would even notice him. What he didn’t count on was that Jesus would stop right under the tree, look up, and make him an offer he could not refuse: “*Zaccheus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.*” What we come to realize in this beautiful encounter between a public sinner and Jesus is that while Zaccheus was “curious” about Jesus, Jesus was seeking after Zaccheus to save him, and to let him know how much God loved him, in spite of his human limitations and sinful practices.

I think that is the main message God’s Holy Word is trying to tell all of us: God is always looking for us---whether we are looking for Him or not, God always wants to be one with us. That, of course, is why God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world---to help us to know how much He loves us. Just as Jesus did with Zaccheus, Jesus looks at us with love. He knows our sins, but He encourages our virtues; He sees our limitations, but He focuses on our strengths; He is quite aware of our failings, but He wants us to develop our potential for good.

In addition, it also goes without saying, that when we choose to be one with Jesus, we are also choosing to be one with the entire Body of Christ---to be one with all our sisters and brothers in Christ: those members of our own family; those people with whom we live and work;

those people here who are fellow members of St. Catherine of Siena Parish, and all those sisters and brothers in our Family of Faith throughout the Church.

St. Catherine of Siena Parish's 50 year history has been a full and rich one. From its establishment on August 10, 1966, and through the leadership of the 10 pastors (with Fr. Ken being the 10th) and the many parochial vicars who have served here during that time (both diocesan priests as well as a number of priests of the Marianist community), the religious witness of the Notre Dame Sisters and the Sisters of St. Dominic in the earlier years to lead the religious education efforts, and the great emphasis on lay leadership and ministry, St. Catherine Parish has grown and flourished into the largest parish in our Diocese.

St. Catherine of Siena, the patroness of this parish, was an amazingly strong religious woman who lived in Siena, Italy in the 1380's during a time of great division in the Church. In her 33 very brief years that she lived in this world, she not only was able to help restore unity in the Church, but she worked tirelessly on matters of social justice of the day rooted in her deep love for Jesus. Because of her brilliance and spiritual insight which has been so long-lasting in the Church's spiritual tradition for these 700 years since her death, she was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Pope Paul VI, when this parish was only four years old.

In the spirit of St. Catherine of Siena, this parish has always had a very real sense of responding to the needs of the larger Church, especially in regard to social justice issues, and with a sense of a true missionary spirit. For nearly 20 years, St. Catherine Parish has had a strong and active relationship with a sister parish in El Salvador. And in fact, Fr. Ken and a group of parishioners are leaving this week to pay a visit to your "sister" and to offer encouragement and support. St. Catherine of Siena Parish has focused on all those aspects of what it means to be a truly vibrant Catholic Parish, who take care of the sacramental, pastoral, and catechetical needs of one another, but who also realize that any true encounter with Jesus Christ results in ongoing personal conversion, and a generous heart to reach out to others.

That's exactly what happened to Zaccheus. As a result of that loving encounter with Jesus, Zaccheus changed his life completely. We heard him say: "*Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor; and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over.*" That is quite a "conversion"----a complete "change of heart". But that is what happens when we truly encounter the Lord---when we really allow Jesus to see us for who we are and invite Him into our lives. We cannot remain "unchanged"; just like Zaccheus,

we will want to change what is sinful about our lives; we will want to avoid whatever it is that might keep us from walking in His ways.

That is why we too must first of all turn away from sin in our own lives as we continue to go through our life-long conversion process, but also to be concerned about those in our world who lack the basic necessities of life, to work for justice, mercy and charity in our relationships and in our world. That is what happens when we too climb down from the trees or come out of the shadows and allow ourselves to be encountered by Jesus Who is seeking a strong and vibrant relationship with each of us. When we allow Jesus to “come and stay in our house”, amazing things will take place.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus has come into our world not just to save the world in general, but to seek out each and every one of us, whether we're actively practicing our faith, or if we might occasionally hide in trees, or even if we might sometimes think we don't need or have time for God. That's what the gift of our Faith provides for us----the ability to see life not just from our own limited human perspective, but to see life from God's perspective. Our Faith enables us to see that while God is all-powerful, He is more concerned with being “the Lover of our souls”. That's why He sent Jesus to seek us out, and to invite Himself into our homes, into our lives, into our hearts so that He can bring us salvation. St. Catherine Parish has provided this “spiritual home” for thousands of families and tens of thousands of people over these 50 years.

May God bless St. Catherine Parish on this Golden Anniversary, and in the beautiful words we heard St. Paul say to the Thessalonians in today's Second Reading, “*May our God (continue to) make you worthy of His calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith, that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.*” May God's holy work continue to be done here in this community of faith, and may the Mission of the Church be advanced for many generations still to come.

God bless you now and always.