

Dt 11:18, 26-28, 32
Ps 31:2-3, 3-4, 17, 25
Rom 3:21-25, 28
Mt 7:21-27

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(1)

The little three year old daughter of my niece is quite articulate and as cute as a button. But much to my dismay she has been shy of me until very recently – in fact just last Memorial Day – when the whole family was gathered in the parlor at my sister’s house. She just made my heart melt when she declared, out of the blue and in a rare moment of quiet among us, “Uncle Frank, I want to hang out with you.” Well I had been trying to win her over but this remark, coming when it did really surprised me and caused all of us to utter a collective “ahhh” at the innocence of her tiny appeal ...and it certainly pleased me.

In the gospel I just read to you, Jesus warns his listeners that they had better take seriously all the things he had just been telling them, in what has come to be known as his “sermon on the mount.” As was the habit of the people of his time he knew they would admire what he said but put little, if any, of it into action. His people lacked the initiative of “doing” and mostly settled for just “being.” There is, of course, room for both doing and being, a time for activity both moderate and intense, and a time for quiet, stillness and reflection. In our culture we emphasize the active side of life. Many have said we overemphasize it and are anxious and restive in moments of stillness and quiet. If true this isn’t healthy and cannot help our spiritual growth. We need such times to become conscious of God’s activity within us. He seldom overpowers us. His movements are subtle and require careful attention – a kind of prayer that is called contemplation.

Although in this gospel Jesus speaks out against merely listening without acting he would be the last to advocate a life of constant activity. He consistently sought out moments when he could be alone, apart from the crowd, even in desert places. It is important for us to realize that in admonishing the crowd to actively carry out his words in today’s gospel he was challenging them to be different from their normal way of acting. If today we wanted to challenge ourselves to be different from our normal way of acting we would focus on slowing down, dwelling peacefully in the moment, without anxious concerns from our overworked, busy and worrisome brains. After all God made us. He therefore knows what is good for us. He wants our minds to be preoccupied with Him, in a trustful peaceful way, as though we actually believed he is infinitely merciful, good and forgiving. He cannot and will not do us any harm.

The older I get the more my picture of Jesus changes. Now I see him primarily as

one who challenges us, always challenges us - to reach deeper within ourselves to detect his presence, to stretch our ability to trust, further and further, to let go of persons, places and things that we once thought indispensable to our life and happiness, to abandon our need to achieve and to embrace instead our weaknesses, to let God be God on his terms instead of ours, to really understand that we need to prove nothing – absolutely nothing to him, simply to be and allow him to act through us and in this to find our ultimate contentment.

(2)

Simply stated we “let go and let God,” but as simple as it sounds I also know that it is not easy. At every turn we have to quiet our fears and take the next step... quiet them, not necessarily eliminate them. My father used to quote his father to me, who had learned as an orphan and a shepherd boy in Italy that a “courageous man is a fearful one.” If there is no fear to deal with then there is no need for courage. My father said his father had learned this under the night stars minding the sheep when his loneliness was nearly overpowering. Such stories turned my grandfather into a legendary figure in my mind at the time. But long before him Jesus said the same thing when he turned to a group of mourners wailing desperately at the scene of a child’s death and said, “Fear is useless.” But he himself was soon to experience it in the garden with the prospect of his own agony crowding in on him. So useless or not, we must deal with it and deal with it constructively.

And so the inward journey is not an easy one because eventually it allows all the questions of our existence to surface and with them all our fears. But the journey is designed to neutralize them. How? By allowing God’s power to take over...by self surrender...not self-control...a remarkable late-life discovery. Some learn it early but not until the experience of a lifetime has taken place. How often have we heard people say things like, “I would never have chosen this, but I also consider it the most valuable experience of my life,” or something to that effect? It is wisdom and there is a price to pay for it. But its value is truly priceless.

For us moderns prayer, quiet and reflection is a human need not often filled in the lives of many. But we have this opportunity when we decide to ask the lord if we might “hang out with him.” He would be very pleased to do so. After all isn’t he the one who chose to hang out with us? How could he refuse? He loves us all, even those of his children who put him to death. He is more than an uncle trying to win us over. He is our God, Our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sanctifier.