

July 15, 2012

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Jesus summoned the twelve and began to send them out two by two...

The twelve drove out many demons and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

MK 6: 7&13

I am in the process of writing a book about spiritual balance and it seems to me this is at the heart of the mission of the twelve sent out, to bring balance where there was imbalance. Illness is an imbalance, a disquiet, a disconnect. Jesus, through his healing ministry now entrusted to his disciples, went about making connections, uniting the sick with their families, reuniting lepers with their communities and restoring integral balanced health to the lives of the suffering sick.

This last week, we celebrated the Feast of Saint Benedict. For 1500 years, the sons of Benedict and the daughters of Saint Scholastica, his sister, have carried on a balanced ministry.

The Benedictines, in contrast to earlier ascetics, followed a balanced rule and lived a balanced life. Today, I leave for Ireland and our first few days there will be spent at Glenstal Abbey, a Benedictine house. I owe much to the influence of the Benedictines in my college life at Conception Abbey, but also to the example and prayers of my uncle, Brother Bernard Fitzgerald, a monk of New Melleray in Iowa and in his later years, a monk at Our Lady of the Assumption in Ava, Missouri.

In 1915, Brother Bernard left his home in Omaha and traveled eastward. When he finally reached Dubuque Iowa, he walked the 13 miles to the abbey and began a measured life that would take him into his eighties. Even though the Trappists are the most austere of the Benedictines, there is still a rhythm and a balance in their life between work and prayer, and with Brother Bernard certainly a balance with humor and nature.

Father Raphael Stafford who lived with Brother Bernard from 1929 until his death would write of him: “He was a good friend of mine. He made a fine appearance in his younger days with a slim figure and red beard, and pleasing ways. He was guest master or helper all his days, was always communicative and quoting poems. He did much for the community such as guest master, dishwasher, gardener, and community cook besides all the classes and prayers of the community down through the years. He did not sleep well at night, but made up for it whenever sleep overtook him, especially during classes. He admired Brother Ambrose Corbett’s sanctity and feared for himself whether all his sidelines like growing berries and roses were always done with proper blessings. Shortly before his death, I was appointed to help him make whiskey jelly so I could write up his recipe for it. In the midst of the solemnities, he said, ‘Just think, in a few days I’ll be up in my eighties.’ After a short pause, he said, ‘Up in his eighties, he went to Hades!’ Brother Bernard then giggled so much, he could not stop, until finally sweeping his arm twice in front of him, he said, ‘God forbid! God forbid!’ After talking to anyone, he would dismiss himself, saying, ‘Well I’ll leave you in peace now.’ ”

Another monk would write of him,

“Ever since I knew him, he had a love for flowers, plants, and trees. He was often seen planting them and caring for them and knew how to collect the seeds, and how to graft. He could carry on quite a conversation with some like-minded guests. He had a pleasant way about him. I never felt forced to be other than myself in his presence. He had an attractive smile. His laugh was always a subdued chuckle, but his eyes would sparkle. Basically he was a happy person with a pleasant sense of humor. He had a fabulous memory. There were certain poems and nonsense rhymes, which he memorized, and he could go on and on. He lived in reality. He was sensitive to what went on. As far as I could tell, he walked along with everyone. He fit in and tried to live at peace with everyone.”

Thus a few simple yet somewhat profound memories of one Benedictine out of the thousands unsung through the centuries who lived the balanced life that came from the Rule of Saint Benedict. It is the story of someone close to the rhythms of the earth, living a simple, prayerful, and happy life that seemed to balance.

Jesus of Nazareth was all about balance. He sent his disciples out in today's Gospel in balanced pairs and wherever they went they too sought to bring balance.

(I dedicated my Contemporary North American Prayer Book to Brother Bernard.)