

Unleash the Gospel Homily #3: Unleash the Gospel in Our Parish

(by Fr. Jeffrey Day, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Detroit)

[Readings: Daniel 12:1-3; Psalm 16; Hebrews 10:11-14, 18; Mark 13:24-32]

For the past couple of weeks, we have been exploring how things have changed for us in the Archdiocese of Detroit in light of the movement we call “Unleash the Gospel.” Recall that the movement to unleash the Gospel is an invitation from Jesus to encounter Him anew, to grow in our Catholic faith and to witness to Christ’s mercy in the world. Last weekend, we talked about how this movement is inspiring individuals and families to bring the life-changing relationship and mission of Jesus to everyone we meet and to everything we do. The movement encourages individuals and families to be “all in” for Jesus, and to become the joyful, missionary disciples he is calling us to be.

Today we are examining how this movement impacts parishes. Let me begin by asking us to reflect upon our image of what a parish is: What comes to mind? I propose that a useful image for the times we are living in is that of a boat, and more specifically, the image of a lifeboat. It’s not too far-fetched. The idea of the Universal Church as a boat at sea is actually an ancient image used by our ancestors in faith. We hear about the Universal Church as the “Barque of Peter.” Seeing individual parishes as lifeboats is a good symbol for the task of parishes.

Let’s connect this to the Readings for today. Think back to a line we heard in Scripture during the First Reading from the Book of the Prophet Daniel: “it shall be a time unsurpassed in distress.” We can see around us that many families and individuals are struggling, in distress in their daily lives. They feel like they are drowning in a culture that is devoid of true meaning. Even many of those who might be blessed with material wealth face a poverty of spirit. People are turning to unhealthy relationships, substances and other dead-end outlets to fill up what is lacking in their spirits. But there is only one thing that will truly satisfy them: a relationship with God.

At a certain level, people understand that what the world is offering does not bring satisfaction and fulfillment. Until people know where they can find that deeper meaning, they are lost: lost at sea, so to speak.

Many of the people living on the boundaries of our parishes they feel like they are lost at sea, on the verge of drowning.

What do people need when they are in this condition? They need a lifeboat. They need to escape the perils of the thrashing sea. The reading today from Daniel continues with these words: "At that time your people shall escape." This is where our parishes come in. They are like the lifeboats spread across our Archdiocese offering hope and salvation.

But for too long, our parishes have not responded with urgency to the task at hand. We have seen pews empty, parishes closed and people walking away from any kind of organized religion. Yet we must prepare for what is coming. We know from the words in today's Gospel that we must all face Christ. He will come again at the end of time to collectively judge the world, but each person will also face Christ at the end of his or her life. Preparing for this eventual meeting with the Lord is our urgent task. This movement to unleash the Gospel means that our parishes need to rise to the occasion. We must become speedy lifeboats, ready to save souls from drowning.

How can we turn our parishes into the speedy lifeboats up for the task at hand? First of all, by prioritizing our time and energy to the most important tasks, and by spending a lot less time – or even stopping – the unimportant tasks.

Our priests need to reflect upon these words from the Letter to the Hebrews: "Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins." Priest and parishes calendars are filled with many activities during the week, but, are all of these activities really things related to freeing people from their sins?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus has offered "one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God."

Entering more fully into the movement called "Unleash the Gospel" means that parishes are called to renew their efforts to make clear that the most

important events that are celebrated each week are the Sunday celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. That is because the Mass is the one sacrifice that does take away sins. This means that parishes should make their top priority the Sunday experience, when most of the people come out of the raging waters of the world and step into the lifeboat.

Fr. Jeff Day continues: When I was the pastor of St. Fabian Parish in Farmington Hills, we took to heart this call to place our emphasis and focus on the Sunday experience.

The Amazing Parish Conference held three years ago taught to work very diligently to improve three very important areas for each Sunday: hospitality, hymns and the homily.

First of all, hospitality. We added a greeter ministry in addition to that of usher. We reminded our parishioners that they are all ministers of hospitality. Every member has the task of welcoming others in the name of Christ. Each weekend we had food and fellowship after all of the Masses. Right at the beginning of each Mass, I would give greetings to those who had been away from church for a while. At the end of Mass, visitors were encouraged to stay for fellowship and learn more about the parish at the welcome desk.

Once a month, we had “name tag” Sunday, and parishioners were encouraged to make name tags for themselves on the way into Mass. All of these efforts at improved hospitality helped us make great strides toward improving the experience of the weekend Masses. People enjoyed being at church, and wanted to stay afterwards.

Secondly, in terms of hymns, we attempted to choose pieces that really allowed people to pray. Hymn choice inherently depends on the culture of an individual parish. But in our case, it made a big difference to use the types of hymns that really allowed our people to pray.

Some parishes are already using technology to allow this to happen, usually in the form of screens and projectors. Whatever means a parish uses, bringing a revival to the music at Mass, which allows people to really pray while singing, helps them to better connect with our Lord.

Finally, the priests and the deacons renewed efforts in our preaching and in the crafting and delivery of our homilies. Homilies were given a priority in terms of preparation time. Instead of spending wasted time on low-impact “office work” each week, this time was transferred to presenting the faith in meaningful ways. This often meant looking ahead at the liturgical calendar and planning out the preaching as a series of homilies over several weeks.

For example, we spent five weeks in a row talking about different ways to pray. In Advent, each Sunday involved a homily on the theme of hope. Preaching from week to week in a series on a particular theme meant a few positive things: It was easier to prepare, and we could tell people ahead of time what was coming next. This empowered the people in the pews to invite friends and family to the preaching series. People like series, and they get hooked in them, which we see in the popularity of Netflix. Our parishes should be places that get people “hooked on” the Word of God. Our homilies should invite them back week after week, and a preaching series can help make that happen.

As we made these changes at St. Fabian to improve the Sunday experience through better hospitality, hymns and homilies, the parish staff and volunteers began to shift their energies to activities that really promoted evangelization. We began running Alpha courses throughout the year, and got many people to participate. Many parishes have also been running a course called Christ Life. In these and other ways, parishes are waking up to the fact that parishes need to help the people already in the pews become better disciples of Jesus, while simultaneously reaching out to people who do not yet know Jesus.

It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. Our culture has changed dramatically over the last several decades. Many people are feeling lost at sea and drowning. Our parishes need to adapt to and respond to that change. The movement called “Unleash the Gospel” is something new. It invites parishes to be bold and to be innovative – but also to get back to the fundamentals. Our

parishes are on a life-saving mission. Our parishes exist to save souls for Jesus Christ.

I'd like to end my preaching by telling you this true story. When our parish was doing all of the things I've shared with you, at times I wondered if it was really making an impact. Yes, there were more people coming to church, and that was a good feeling. But was it really impacting people's spiritual lives? One day, as the congregation was leaving Mass, two different people came up to me, independent of one another, and said to me, in effect: "Father, I feel the Holy Spirit is alive here!" That was confirmation to me that what was happening to our parish was the work of the Holy Spirit. Isn't that what we want for all of our parishes? Not just to be lifeboats rescuing the lost, but places where the people of God experience the living presence of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!