

Homily St Pius–St Anthony 5th Sunday Lent Year B

Don't you think Philip is a useful guy? Maybe we could say he is the 'go-to' guy for the Greeks in the gospel at least! The Greeks who are curious to meet Jesus know that Philip will serve as doorman-gatekeeper to set up a meet. So, Philip brokers the introduction. I find him in a similar role in John 6 when Jesus is about to feed the 5,000 and he asks Philip "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" (John 6:5). Philip either knew the local market prices really well, and or knew the dealers who could pull together such large quantities of food that fast (or not-which is likelier the case). Of course, Jesus was teaching Philip here to trust Him, that he could work wonders even when the savviest businessman could not pull a deal together. Back in that story, Philip had told Jesus, (John 6:7) 'Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little bit food.' Because Philip comes up short here, it is Jesus that provides. So Philip is useful, but I think Jesus' further point is that all the connections in the world, or all the resources in the world, still only keeps you in the world-this life-earthbound Yet, to venture beyond (talking about eternal life now) requires doing just that—venturing beyond. It takes you out of yourself beyond. So this introduces Jesus, talking about this single grain of wheat. What is the success of a single grain of wheat? If it wants to accomplish anything beyond itself, it has to let go, submit-surrender to being buried, to think of things greater than itself, and sacrifice itself into a greater cause. Yet, if it does that, it doesn't die, it produces more than ever possible had it only remained fixed on itself-the single grain. If the single grain gets the glory, than that is all its yield – one grain. But if it disappears into the ground for greater things to come, than amazingly, how much more comes? Too much to count. From one seed successfully giving itself to the process, imagine the flower or fruit that comes forth and contains how much more seed? That is like the eternal life Jesus is talking about today. He basically states two things: 1) unless grain of wheat falls to ground and dies, it remains only one, but dying, it becomes so much more than itself and then 2) whoever would try to save-preserve-cling to his/her own life, in fact, ends up destroying and losing it, BUT whoever can let go with trust, surrender and give their life (to that greater purpose) then that one, will gain life eternally. Forever! (changed yes, but forever!)

The first part I think we get easily enough by understanding seeds and their planting. Then we harvest the seed/fruit later in the fall. But, Jesus' second part may be what confuses or baffles us: the part about those trying to save their life who will end up losing it, while those losing & letting go, will find and save life.

This can get really deep, but it doesn't have to. I think the best approach to understanding what Jesus is talking about here is to compare it to other situations

that happen around us all the time. Think of disciplined sports players who know to play their best they cannot overthink their plays in the game. Yes, they concentrate on every detail and practice, practice, practice them all week, but come Saturday you trust your skills and just get into the game (I think they say, 'enter the zone') – When the ball is in play, they just execute and not overthink each move (with most sports, it means following the ball). Or imagine the gymnast or dancer who has a routine to perform, and they painstakingly chart-itemize every step, turn or bend in practice, but when the competition or performance begins, if you think through every single move and jump, you probably going to fall out of step with partner or trip up yourself and lose your symmetry. Don't we Catholics run into this sometimes with our memorized prayers? How many times don't we start our prayers and in our routine if we begin to slowly analyze a particular word said, or the prayer coming next; we freeze asking "Where am I?" (Btw, the safest thing then is just to start over). The problem is that we are overthinking it. Trying to save it and we lose it. This is what people mean I think when they tell someone failing, 'You are trying too hard-relax and trust your training.'

I remember a guy I did landscape work for, that once during a break he pulled out a BB rifle, that he and his son had been playing with and he said to me 'Do you think you can shoot this Can from your hip?' I thought "No way", and he said, 'You may surprise yourself-Watch' And no kidding, he threw an old pound coffee can up in the air and just raised the rifle from his hip and 'ding' he nailed it. I thought 'That's incredible'. So he said, "You try it." I thought 'Sure-okay-I'm on your time'. And, with about ten throws and I was still shooting mosquitoes-of course, no dings on the can. So, then he went into this little pep talk about old westerns or wild west shooters (I know they are only TV shows), telling me that their simple quick 'point shooting' with lots of practice could turn out pretty accurate (he said those old pistols never had sights because they would snag on holsters in quick draws). He suggested that the cowboys were just following & anticipating a target calmly and after practice. So he told me to try again, and this time, 'Just relax, don't stress on aiming, raise up barrel and find the can'. (I realize this kind of sounds like Jedi-training or something- Yoda & Luke stuff). But really, about three more tries, and then 'ding'! Sure enough I'd hit it- but I definitely wasn't overthinking it, I was totally at ease, just shooting at where I thought the can would go. (and I quit while ahead- may never have hit one again). But I understood his point: that a good marksman doesn't over-do it, they have to rest their breathing, relax their body movement and just follow through – similar to a good long putt.

I bet we've all probably had the opposite happen too, that we might have held on to too tightly to something and in the process, took the life out of it. Think of how

photographers can try to freeze a shot and say 'Hold-just one more-be natural' and it isn't long until everything about the pose feels fake. Or maybe when we have held something so delicate but as you hold it so tightly, you end up dropping it (maybe it is sweat that causes it or maybe it makes you so nervous you shake and lose grip). Or another example of this, happens if you have you ever tried to catch something but the more you tried, further it slipped away from you. But if you just stopped a minute, it came right to you. I had a great little mini-pin dog Simonetta and she was so precocious a pup that she would run for the hills anytime a door cracked. If she broke loose, she charged for the furthest horizon causing me to run and pursue. One time she slipped out of her harness, and I panicked- she would go straight for the busy road or straight to the huge German shepherd neighbor dog (both of which meant instant death). I would call her name-shout her name and chase and chase trying to corner her, nothing worked; until one time starting a hot pursuit, a friend said 'Stop-this will get her every time- just catch her eye, and then drop yourself flat to the ground'. No kidding it worked like a charm. Then minute I dramatically (arms open) went down on the ground- she came charging (I assure you it was not to see if I was okay- but it was to jump on digging in my hair) But it worked, I caught her then. I guess I was trying too hard before, my overzealous pursuing was pushing her away. But I understand that to be similar to what Jesus is talking about: that trying to preserve one's life will actually lead to its loss. We don't need to overthink or overanalyze our moves, but simply trust who we are following-Jesus. Following Him means that we are serving what is greater than ourselves. St Francis breaks it down best for us in the Peace Prayer Song (Make me a channel of your peace), where it says, 'For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.'