

The Pentecost  
St. John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15  
May 20, 2018  
St. George's Church Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## Should or Must?

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”

I read recently about the difference between the words should and must. At first blush they look the same, but they are quite different. We all live with many “shoulds” in life, floating about in our conscience. They can keep us awake at night. I should do this and I should do that. Trouble is, should doesn't get you there. I should go on a diet. I should exercise. I should say my daily prayers. I should meditate today. I should get to work on time. I should go to church tomorrow. Should does not mean it will happen. Often, should become a chain around our necks that we resist, even when should is the right thing to do. Should does not mean it will get done. I still cheat one more time on my diet. I come up with a great excuse not to exercise. Because I am late and in a rush, I don't say my prayers. I am late to work. I roll over in bed on Sunday morning for a few more minutes of sleep and then I miss church.

Sometimes we say publicly that I should do this or that, but it doesn't mean I will do it. It just acknowledges I feel it is the right or a good thing to do. I have a lot of these rattling around in my brain. I should visit Scotland before I die. I should go to the play at Hartford Stage before it closes. I should try that new restaurant. I should read that book, and then I leave it on my nightstand for several years! Those are the more positive shoulds which we ought to tend to. Then there are more serious ones: I should tell my friend I am sorry and ask him to forgive me. I should go visit my other friend who is laid up in the nursing home. I should call so-in-so who is grieving the loss of their husband. I should admit I was wrong to my boss and co-workers. If I miss these shoulds, I will likely get a black mark in the old grade book in heaven. There is a use by date on many of these shoulds. Let it expire and you have missed that opportunity, sometimes forever.

Then there are your friends and family who dump their shoulds on you: You should go to college. You should get a better job. You could do better than that woman you are with. You should do something about your hair. You should wear different clothes. You should go to my church. And on the list goes. I don't know about you, but while I listen to all these shoulds I hear, they are often filed away and forgotten, unless I write it down to pay some extra attention later. I have enough of my own shoulds, thank you. In fact, we sometimes come to resent or distance ourselves from such “should machines.” However, the greatest should machines are often our parents, and well, you can't distance yourself there, unless the shoulds are too frequent and loud.

Should works about as well in the spiritual life. I should get to church each week or start back this Sunday. I should say my prayers. I should improve my relationship with God. (People who should improve their relationship with God, likely need to improve their earthly relationships, so

why not improve those first-the ones with the people you can see, instead of the God you probably haven't?) While I should do all these things, the power and motivation to get them done do not match that of the power that is really moving my life. To find out what that power is, simply look at how you spend most of your time. It may be struggling to pay the bills. It may be the responsibility you have to care for another. It may be supporting habits you have adopted to cope with the stress in your life. But while you should focus on your spiritual life, should doesn't get it done. It is too easy to focus on other life priorities and place your spirituality on a back burner. Even for me, a priest, who is supposed to have this down right! Should will never get it done until you realize you must make your spiritual life a high priority in your life.

Must might just get it done. Must does not leave the option of avoiding, postponing or ignoring what must be done. Must implies an urgency to what we must do. Must moves us from inaction to action. I must get my taxes done by April 15. I must visit my aunt before she has her operation. Must might get me to take my prayers more seriously. Must might get me to see it is time for change in my life because things are not working the way I am doing it, that is, I must do it, if I want to live.

Must empowers me to set priorities of what I need to do, and then gives me the motivation and energy to do it, even if I feel weak. Must keep me going when I feel tired and want to quit or make excuses, because I know I am accountable, I know I must get this done. Must implies a deadline: not tomorrow. Take action today. Must is like a fire in me, propelling me forward. It is a fire under me, knowing that if I pause or put it off and sit back, I will get burned letting myself sit on the fire. So I keep moving. I forget whatever else is trying to distract me, and I focus on what I must do.

Spiritually must implies an energy that cannot be resisted, contained or postponed. I thank God for my blessings because I must do it, I have a strong feeling inside my heart that I cannot tamp down or resist. The thankfulness pops out because nothing can contain it. I must take my spiritual life seriously because I can no longer live without doing so. I have wandered in the desert, thirsty long enough. I need to come back and drink at the well and rehydrate spiritually.

You feel joy and peace in your heart, and that comes out because it must. How it comes out may be another matter, but it strives for expression in your life. Must in the spiritual life is irresistible. The same is true of feeling loved and being moved to love others. To make a play on the words of the philosopher Rene Descartes, whose great insight was, "I think, therefore, I am." I would say, "I love, therefore, I am."

For the Apostles, Pentecost was a big must. They had been sitting around wondering what they should do next. Some concluded they should return to their former lives before they met Jesus. After being touched by the Spirit of God, they were empowered to do what they must. They could not not do it. The Spirit in them is so strong, they cannot contain it. They explode, and nothing will get in the way of what they must do, even the threat of death. They are ready to risk everything. Their priorities are straight and clear. They must preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. They must love others as they have been loved by God. And because they did these things, we are here this morning. What must you do? AMEN