

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
January 15, 2017

A priest went to a monastery for a month-long retreat. The monk leading the retreat said, "You must take a vow of silence and can only say two words every week."

The priest agreed and after the first week, the head monk came to her and said, "What are your two words?"

"Food cold!" the priest replied.

Another week went by and the head monk came to her and said, "What are your two words?"

"Bed hard!" the priest exclaimed.

The third week went by and the head monk came and said, "What are your two words?"

"I quit!" said the priest.

"Well," the head monk replied, "I am not surprised. You have done nothing but complain ever since you got here!"

Many of you will know that I attended the annual Clergy retreat at Bethlehem Retreat Centre in Nanaimo this past week. I have nothing to complain about.... it was such a special time! I thank you all for this gift of time away. The theme of the retreat was Eucharistic Living. And the retreat leader was a former priest of this Diocese, James Koester. He now lives as a monk of The Society of Saint John the Evangelist in a monastery in Boston, and was recently elected Superior.

We had 3 days of mostly blessed silence. A time where we didn't have to formulate thoughts and could just rest into the love of God. We celebrated the Eucharist every morning, did noonday and evening prayers, and had teaching sessions with Brother James. One evening we also learned how to gaze onto an icon - that is a whole other story.

What does it mean to live Eucharistically? Brother James led us through a way of imagining and engaging with this way of looking at life. In the liturgy, we make a pattern of gestures that I suggest we delve into and explore this coming Lent.

The aspects of our liturgy involve offering, blessing, breaking, giving and sending. Think about it: we **offer** our gifts – the wine, bread, and money, we **bless** them on the altar, we **break** the bread, we are **given** the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and, we are **sent** out into the world to serve.

Over the course of the retreat, we were invited to look at how this liturgical pattern might be reflected in our own personal lives. And sure enough, there were many "ahha" moments as we each followed our lives back to see how mysteriously, moment by moment, God has led us through this pattern, deepening our understanding and our ability to receive and give love.

I would have gone to the retreat regardless of the title or leader because I yearn for time away from the world, I love silence, and time to rest into the love of God while others feed me. I also really value connecting with my peers. A new experience, and a very special one for me. But the fact that Eucharist was a key word and focus for the retreat

made it extra special. You see the Eucharist is one of the ways I was called into the church.

I married a man who had been ordained in the Roman church.... obviously before we were married! While he was unable to fulfill his vows and was relieved of them, he was still a faithful churchgoer. And because I'm a naturally curious person, I attended mass regularly with him, enjoying the amazing music, the stained glass windows and the sense of peace. I had no other interest in what was going on and frankly, it all sounded like background noise to me and when I listened more carefully, like mumbo jumbo.

Then we moved to Victoria and started attending the cathedral with our two young sons. Over many months, I became aware of a yearning when I watched people go forward for communion. That slight pull on my heart increased over a year until I felt tears stinging my eyes when people went forward and I was required to stay in my seat.

That pull, that yearning, became a strong desire that moved me to begin the process of RCIA (the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) in the Roman church – a year-long program that led me to decide to be baptized. That was 23 years ago.

When I met with the Bishop 4 years ago, as I described to you last week, one of the questions he asked me, out of the blue, was, "Think ahead 5 years from now.... where do you see yourself? Administering communion or receiving it?" And without pause to think, I said, "Both."

Participating in the Eucharist, as recipient or as one who administers is a life-changing activity. We have no idea of the profound

effect ingesting the sacrament of life has on us. Regardless of our intention.

One of my spiritual teachers is Cynthia Bourgeault. She was raised a Quaker. In university, as a student of music, she attended what she thought was a concert in a church. But when an usher waved her to get up and file towards the front of the church, she realized she was in a service of some kind. She nodded “no” and the usher, irritated, insisted she stop holding things up and start moving. As she was walking up single file to the altar, she wondered what she should do. Getting close, she watched what others did and put her hands out to receive. Once she ingested the bread, something happened, and she knew she had been changed in some profound and inexplicable way. Thus started her amazing journey towards the priesthood in the Episcopalian church and her role as a spiritual teacher.

My husband had the experience where someone came into his office and said, “What’s going on at this church?” Jim didn’t know if he was being accused of something. He asked for clarification. The person said, “Every time I come up for communion, I feel so overwhelmed with love that I feel like I’m going to fall over.”

Some people have huge epiphanies and their lives are changed overnight. But Br. James talked about how slowly most of us are changed. Often we cannot see it ourselves. But if we look back over time; often we can see it. Every time we partake of the bread and wine; the body and blood of Jesus, our hearts are changed a slight bit and become more oriented to God; more open to receiving God’s love. And so we

become a changed person, and together in community; a changed people.

Brother James spoke about conversion. And the need for us to become converted ourselves before we think about going out and evangelizing others. Because once we are converted, we will not have to decide how to evangelize. Instead, we will not be able to restrain our lips, as the psalmist today writes – “I will not be able to conceal your steadfast love and your faithfulness.” Because, again as the psalmist in today’s reading says to God, “You have give me an open ear.” In other words, we listen for YOUR plan for the world, God. Use us in whatever way you like.

This coming Lent, it would be wonderful to reflect on the idea of Eucharistic living and share with each other, the ways we’ve offered our lives to God, how God has blessed us, how we’ve been broken in our lives, the healing and love we’ve received, and the ways we’ve discovered to go out and serve. Perhaps we would see more clearly exactly how God has been moving in our lives; personally and as the community of St. Mary’s. And I would guess that that would be something to give thanks for!

So this morning as we approach the table set *in* love and given *for* love, can we trust in the mystery of this awesome sacrament and say “yes” to God and let our hearts be changed, little by little, with every meal of bread and wine shared with each other.

Amen.