

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It never ceases to amaze me where the inspiration comes from in preparing my homilies. It could be a chance conversation with someone; something I read the previous month in the newspaper; sometimes a Psalm that doesn't necessarily relate to the Scripture of the day; or a song that rises up in my heart. On occasion the inspiration comes in a dream or the remembrance of something my Mother taught me or my Father told me. And more often than not the inspiration comes only after praying for days over the Scriptures I am to reflect on.

After struggling all week for the inspiration that would inform my reflection for today, it came by surprise early on Saturday morning. I turned on the TV to check on what the weather would be like for today and, of course, the only thing on television yesterday morning was The Royal Wedding.

Now being a dyed-in-the-wool, red-blooded American boy, I am not particularly enamored of the monarchy. And being the grandson and great-grandson of Irish immigrants, I'm not a big fan of the Brits. In fact, my dearly beloved, sainted Grandmother, Nellie McNamara McGivney always referred to the English as the bloody, British "bleeps".

So I was ready to flip the channel when the President of the American Episcopal Church, Bishop Michael Curry, stood up to preach. Professional curiosity got the best of me. And I was mesmerized by his powerful sermon on The Power of Love. Did any of you hear that? Wasn't he awesome?

Briefly Bishop Curry spoke of how love has the power to transform persons, families, communities, nations, and, quoting Dr. King, make of this old world a new world. He explained how God's unconditional love is revealed to us in the unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love of Christ giving up his life for us. He went on to speak from the first letter of John: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love," The transformative power of love, therefore, is known to all who love because to love is to know God who is love.

Bishop Curry then explains how the Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, one of the foremost theologians and scientists of the 20th Century opined that the discovery or invention or harnessing of fire was one of the great scientific and technological advances in all of human history. He took us through history to show that fire was the catalyst that ignited and continues to power all human endeavors. De Chardin concluded "If humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if we ever capture the energy of love it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire."

Reflecting on these teachings of Bishop Curry on the occasion of the Royal Wedding of yesterday in light of the Pentecost event we celebrate today led me to look on that “strong driving wind” that blew through that house on that fateful day as the breathe of God that was so powerful that it ignited “tongues as of fire” that came to rest on the disciples. That fire infused the very being of those in that room with the power of God’s love. The Spirit of God’s love was in that fire and the disciples burst forth from that room proclaiming the mighty love of God so that everyone could understand it.

In John’s Gospel today we read how Jesus broke through the chained door of fear and offered the gift of peace to still every heart. He then sends them forth as the Father sent him, bestowing upon his disciples the Spirit of God’s love to offer everyone who would receive it the unconditional, merciful, already-forgiving love of God for his people.

Twenty-five years ago I was sent to Our Lady of Consolation Parish in Parkesburg. It didn’t feel like I was sent. I thought I was being banished. Some thought I was being punished. As I showed my family around, from the Church to the Parish Center to St. Malachy’s, my brother-in-law, Andy, asked, “Okay, so who did you tick off”?

I came like a “noisy, strong, driving wind” after spending most of my earlier priestly years in African-American parishes with my “Thank you, Jesus-Halleluia” kind of ways. As you read on the Acts of the Apostles, many of the people hearing them thought they were drunk. Many of you, on the other hand, simply thought I was crazy.

I also came as a thoroughly broken man. It occurred to me that I was suffering much like the slaves in the antebellum South, sold away from their families to a foreign place among strangers and since my parish was closed, the family I had formed there during the previous 14 years was cast out of their home. But, it was worse than that, a pastor who has to close his parish is a father, like Abraham of old, who is told to kill his child. But, unlike Abraham who was spared that fate, I did have to close my parish, kill my child. Such was the pain I brought with me to Parkesburg.

However, on the day of my installation as pastor, July 3, 1993, the word of God came to me as I looked out through my teary eyes at you, God’s holy people. that said, “they are like sheep without a shepherd”. In that moment, in all my pain, with all my sorrow, I knew I had been sent.

Throughout those summer months, trying to find my way around, I would get in my car each afternoon and get lost on country roads and cry, listening to Kenny G blow his horn. Gradually the peace and the beauty all around me started bringing healing to my heart, together with the love that I found here.

Dear, sweet Fr. Schneider had told some of you that I would be hurting when I got here and to be good to me. I still don’t know how Joan Halter put up with me that first year,

except for the fire of God's love burning brightly in her heart, for which I will ever be grateful.

Slowly, but surely, more and more and more of you revealed hearts with the Spirit of God's love burning brightly within you, and your love not only healed me, but strengthened me and encouraged me and inspired me and empowered me to strive to offer you the same unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love with which Jesus showed us the unconditional love of God.

I know and deeply regret the many times that I have fallen short in both word and deed from that ideal. To all whom I have hurt or disappointed or angered or frustrated, I humbly apologize and beg your forgiveness. And to those who have chosen to love me anyway, I will always be eternally grateful.

It is still a mystery to me why God in His unconditional love would choose to use the likes of me to be that noisy, strong, driving wind to stir up the flame of the Spirit of His love that burns so brightly in your hearts that has brought us to become the warm, affectionate, loving Church Family that we are, but I'm so glad He did.

Finally, there is a song in my heart that I'd like share with you that speaks the truth of my grateful heart to you and to God. It goes like this:

I've had some good days; I've had some hills to climb;
I've had some weary days and some sleepless nights;
But when I look around and I think things over;
All of my good days out-weigh my bad days. I won't complain.
Sometimes the clouds are low. I can hardly see the road.
I ask the question, Lord. Lord, why so much pain?
But He knows what's best for me; He knows what's best for us.
Although my weary eyes, they can't see.
So I'll just say thank you Lord. I won't complain.
The Lord has been so good to me. He's been good to me,
More than this old world or you could ever be.
He's been so good to me. He dried all my tears away.
Turned my midnights into day. So I'll just say thank you Lord.
I won't complain.
Thank you, Lord! I can't complain!