

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Some of you may remember young Fr. Jim DeGrassa, who has helped us out here a few times. He is now the assistant at SS. Simon and Jude in West Chester. Recently he visited the 2nd grade classroom with the intention of encouraging proper behavior in Church. He tried eliciting from the youngsters rules that their parents might give before taking them to a nice restaurant. One of the children said, “Don’t play with your food”; another said, “Don’t shout and fight with each other”. Jim thought he would be a little more direct and went up to one little fellow and asked, “What rule do your parents give you before you go out to eat?” Without batting an eye, the boy replied, “Order something cheap”.

Can any parents here relate to some of that? I expect so. It’s not easy being a parent. One of the issues in many families is sibling rivalry. Lainie, my sister Louise’s first child, was two when she brought home her second, Carla. It was shortly after our Mother’s death, so her older sister, our Aunt Helen moved in to help for the first few weeks after the newborn arrived. Louise watched Lainie for signs of jealousy or insecurity. But she seemed to adore her little sister from the start. She loved helping Aunt Helen feed and bathe Carla, and she even offered to share her toys. After a month or so, it was time for Aunt Helen to go home. As Louise walked Aunt Helen to the car, they heard this terrible cry of distress. “Aunt Helen”, cried Lainie, as she ran to the car, “you forgot your baby!” It was easy for Lainie to accept Carla, as long as she thought she was Aunt Helen’s baby, and not a permanent part of the family.

Louise went on to have five more babies after those first two, who in turn have blessed her with eight grandchildren and one great-grandson. She ran into another twist on sibling rivalry when one of her grandsons, Dylan, who got along great with his younger brother, Mason, proclaimed he didn’t want a new baby when his parents told them they were going to have another. He was adamant, angry and tearful. Throughout the pregnancy he became more and more distressed. Finally, Louise went to California where they live, as the due-date was imminent. She sat Dylan down and asked him gently, “Dylan, why don’t you want a new baby?” With wide and teary eyes, he looked straight at her and said, “Because I like Mason and I want to keep him.” All that time he was afraid they would have to send back his brother, Mason.

There are many stories in the Bible about sets of siblings: Cain and Abel; Isaac and Ishmael; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers; James and John; Andrew and Simon Peter; Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Some of these sibling relationships turned out well, but most turned out not so good. In almost all of the relationships, however, one of the siblings became more prominent than the other.

While John the Baptist was not Jesus' brother, they probably grew up as such. Remember it was to John's mother, Elizabeth, that Mary ran when she found out that she was pregnant. In our Gospel text today, we hear John, seeing Jesus coming toward him, say, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel."

But he had to have known him. They grew up together. They were like brothers. Besides he was the older of the two.

John then explains, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and remain with him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

For thirty some years they had grown up together; played together; ate together; and then went their separate ways—Jesus taking up his father's work as the carpenter of Nazareth; John going off into the desert to prepare for his mission as a prophet. Now, after years of separation, they meet again when Jesus goes to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan. John somehow knows that there is something wrong with that, but he can't quite put his finger on it. Now, the next day, after a night of prayer, and probably fasting too, John recognizes and proclaims who Jesus really is—the Son of God. That's why he was born. That has been his life-long mission "that he might be made known to Israel". In other words, his reason to live was to point people to Jesus.

The next day he begins this work. He tells two of his disciples, one being Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, and we can assume the other was John, who would become the disciple whom Jesus loved who has written this account, "Behold, the Lamb of God", and they immediately leave John the Baptist and follow Jesus. Andrew, in turn, runs to get his brother, Simon Peter, and leads him to Jesus.

Though John the Baptist had many disciples and thousands that he had baptized, he realized "that he must decrease" as Jesus increased in stature. Similarly, Andrew who leads his brother to Jesus is quickly overshadowed by his brother Simon who would become "the Rock", Peter, upon whom Jesus would build his Church.

What John the Baptist, raised as a brother to Jesus, and Andrew, the brother of Peter, have in common, is that they pointed others to Jesus. What a great epitaph for John the Baptist, "He pointed others to Jesus," and for Andrew, "He brought his brother to Jesus."

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I think that it is fair to say that most of you are uncomfortable about bringing people to Jesus. It is a fact of church life that most people who come to church do so because a friend invited them, and yet very few church members ever invite a friend to church. Isn't that ironic? If we did invite more people more often, this church would be packed every Sunday. That's what the studies show, yet we hesitate.

Most of you are much more comfortable about witnessing for Christ with your actions than your words. You'll provide Christmas gifts for needy children; you'll contribute goods and money to those in distress due to natural calamities; you'll visit the sick in hospitals and care for elderly shut-ins. That is all so good. I understand. That's far better than those who witness with their words, but live such shoddy lives that they defeat their witness.

Now, in light of today's Gospel, I want to ask you to prayerfully consider if there is something you can do to bring someone else or to point someone else to Jesus. You might do it by talking in depth with a family member, a co-worker, a fellow-student, a friend, or a neighbor about the importance of faith to face life's challenges. Do it in a loving, non-judgmental way. You're not called to be a sales person for Jesus. You're called to listen carefully to the hurts, the fears, the concerns of the other, and then answer honestly on the basis of your own walk of faith. And then, as Andrew did with Peter, invite that person to whom you have been sent (and though you may not recognize it at the time—it is the Spirit of God who sent you to that particular person) to come and see for himself or herself. Invite him or her to come to church with you. Offer to pick them up and maybe join you for breakfast or lunch afterwards.

There's an old African-American spiritual titled, "THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD." The second verse goes like this: "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say, 'He died for all'. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul."

Andrew couldn't preach like his brother Simon Peter; neither could he pray like the Apostle Paul. But he could tell the love of Jesus and say, "He died for all." And so can you and I.

Wouldn't that be a great epitaph to have emblazoned on your tombstone: LED PEOPLE TO JESUS?