

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 20, 2009 B

INNER CRAVINGS SUCH AS JEALOUSLY AND SELFISH AMBITION STEAL OUR JOY. FIVE WAYS TO BE AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT AT MASS

Today, we listened to the fourth of five excerpts from St. James' Epistle. A part of this fourth excerpt deals with "inner craving" that can get us in trouble and make life difficult for us. James says: "*Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.*"

Jealousy

Jealousy is an insidious feeling that can wreak havoc on our relationships and steal our joy. Jealousy has destroyed many marriages and seriously hurt many more.

Unfortunately, I do not have a lot of wisdom to offer on this particular feeling. I have over the years read articles and books on most feelings: sadness, joy, fear/anxiety, shame, etc. But, I don't remember ever coming across a good article on jealousy. What causes it and what can help to free us of it? If you have read a good article on this topic, please share it. Two points:

- Feelings are neither right nor wrong. They just exist. It is never a sin to *feel* hate, jealousy, shame or envy, etc. Feelings only take on a moral dimension when they move us to engage in immoral behavior. Therefore, it is not wrong to *feel* jealous. But it is wrong if our feelings of jealousy lead us to engage in destructive behavior that damages another or damages relationships.
- It is generally accepted that the *root cause* of jealousy is *low self-esteem* and *insecurity*. It would seem that if we were truly in touch with our own goodness and giftedness, we would not need to be jealous of another or of his/her qualities. In fact, true self-esteem would allow us to *celebrate* and not be jealous of the successes of another.

True and False Ambition

James also mentions false ambition in his reading today. There is nothing wrong with being ambitious as long as it is kept in check and not allowed to become a god in our lives. All of us should be ambitious to be

the best person we can be. God would love that. We should want to develop our gifts and talents, and succeed in our area of work. But ambition is not good when it becomes a god in our lives, when it hurts our relationship with our family, and causes us to neglect other responsibilities.

In today's Gospel, we have an example of *false* ambition. Some of Jesus' inner circle are arguing about who is going to be most important in his new kingdom. Jesus goes on to say that the really important people in his kingdom will be those with a *servant's heart*. True leadership is not about *lording* it over others, but rather seeking to *serve* others. The ambition that moves us to make ourselves the center of attention and to promote our self-interests is false ambition—at least in the eyes of Jesus. *Gospel ambition* moves us to put Jesus first in our lives and to devote ourselves to furthering the interests of our communities. In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says the following about true servants of the Lord.

- *True servants make themselves available to serve.*
- *True servants do the best with what they have.* They don't keep bemoaning how they are not as talented as others. Neither do they keep saying: "one of these days I will do such and such." Rather, those with a servant's heart pitch in and use the imperfect gifts they have to serve their community.
- *True servants are faithful to their ministry.* They finish their tasks, fulfill their responsibilities, keep their promises, and complete their commitments. They don't leave a job half undone, and they don't quit when they get discouraged. They are trustworthy and dependable.
- *True servants maintain a low profile.* True servants of the Lord do not promote or call attention to themselves. Instead of acting to impress and "dressing for success," they "*put on the apron of humility, to serve one another.*" If recognized for their service, they humbly accept it and don't allow notoriety to distract them from their work. Self-promotion and servanthood don't mix. Real servants don't serve for the approval or applause of others. They live for an audience of One. As Paul said: "*If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.*"

- *True servants think of ministry as an opportunity, not an obligation.* They enjoy helping people, meeting needs and doing ministry. They “*serve the LORD with gladness.*” Why do they serve with gladness? Because they love the Lord, they’re grateful for his grace, they know serving is the highest form of life, and they know God has promised a reward.

I am glad to say that here at Ascension, we have *many humble servants* of the Lord. Week after week, they go about their service not seeking attention. They are simply glad to have the *opportunity* to serve God and to be of help to others.

FIVE BEHAVIORS THAT HELP US TO BE ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS AT MASS

In the Vatican II document on the Liturgy, the bishops state that “full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered above all else” (14). It also states that “Pastors of souls must realize...that it is their duty to ensure that the faithful take part in the Mass knowingly, actively and fruitfully” (11). The following are five behaviors to develop for all who wish to be active participants in the Mass. As you read through these, I suggest you rate yourself on each behavior.

Behavior #1 – Hospitality. Everyone enjoys coming to a place where there is a spirit of welcome and hospitality. A spirit of hospitality does not mean a lot of chatter before Mass. But it does mean an attitude that says to those around us: “I am glad to see you.” A simple “good morning” or a welcoming smile communicates a spirit of hospitality. We help the presence of Christ in the assembly to come alive when we are hospitable to those around us at Mass.

Behavior #2 – Participating in the sung prayer of the church. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, St. Augustine used to come and sit in the back of the church while the Mass was going on. Concerning the singing, Augustine wrote:

*How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs,
and the voices that echoed through your Church!
What emotion I experienced in them!
Those sounds flowed into my ears,
distilling the truth in my heart.
A feeling of devotion surged within me,
and tears streamed down my face,
tears that did me good. (C 1157)*

Augustine’s words speak of the power of music and song to touch hearts. An important part of active participation in the Mass is joining in the “*sung prayer.*” Ideally, at Mass we don’t just sing the songs

but we *pray* the songs. We do this by paying attention to the text of the song and making an effort to lift our minds and hearts to God during our singing.

Behavior #3 – Active listening. During the proclamation of the readings and the homily, we are especially called to listen attentively. This demands a real effort on our part as it is so easy to allow our minds to be distracted.

Behavior #4 – Spirit of generosity. The following are four ways to allow a spirit of generosity to impact the way we participate in the Eucharist.

- Getting to church on time and remaining until the end of the final song
- Giving of ourselves to the song and prayer of the Mass
- Giving of our financial resources to the church during the collection
- Bringing food for the poor (if the parish has such a project)

Behavior #5 – Spirit of thanksgiving. At each Mass we participate in, we come primarily to give of ourselves and not to receive. Though of course in our giving, we will receive. When we come to Mass with a “what’s-in-it-for-me” attitude, we are bringing a consumerist mentality into the house of God.

Our behavior at Mass is contagious

It is important to remember that our behavior at Mass is contagious. When we are *hospitable* to those around us at Mass, *sing* enthusiastically, *pray* devoutly, *listen* attentively to the readings and homily, place our *money offering* in the basket, receive the Body and Blood of Christ with *love* and *faith*, move with a sense of *reverence* that reflects awareness that we are on holy ground—we communicate to those around us that we are participating in something very important, and our good example may impact them more than we can ever imagine. On the other hand, when we miss Mass for no good reason, we give a poor example. When we come rushing into Mass, show no hospitality to those around us, behave in a distracted and uninvolved manner, and leave early, we diminish the whole worship atmosphere. We communicate to our church family that “This is not important, I’m bored and not mentally here.”

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah