

31 Sunday B

October 31, 2021

St. Patrick

It was another Halloween weekend, years ago, and I had arrived at the home of a family whom I know well. Their teenage son, one of three teenagers in the family, had badly broken his leg in a basketball game, and was to undergo surgery the next day. The family asked that I celebrate the Anointing of the Sick with him.

I was walking up to the front door of their home. Well, my mind was elsewhere, mulling about something else. I got to the door, and this Halloween witch hanging quietly on the front door started screaming out, screeching loudly, moving its arms and legs menacingly. I spontaneously yelled, grabbed by fear. (I assure you that I haven't returned to their home around Halloween since!)

Fear.

“Moses spoke to the people...‘Fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees...’”

How can we truly love God if we're wracked with dread and fear of our God?

Furthermore, last week Bishop David celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation for a group of our parish teenagers. He prayed that they be inflamed with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In our Catholic tradition one of the seven gifts is—yes, *fear of the Lord*.

How can that be a *gift*—this “fear of the Lord”? Too many folks have been paralyzed spiritually by the dread of a “Gotcha God,” ready to zap us if we do anything wrong.

“Moses spoke to the people...‘Fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees...’”

Friends, fear of the Lord, as we Catholics are to understand it, means *awe*, a reverence of this God who is so beyond us, the transcendent One who is beyond our imagining but who has freely entered into a covenant, a sacred bond of love, with us.

This month a family in the parish showed me a photo of a son of theirs, a senior in college. For fall break he spent the free time with a friend of his. To the horror of

his parents, he and his friend went skydiving. The parents showed me the photo of their son, having jumped from the plane and skydiving thousands of feet from the ground. The instructor took a photo, and their son's face radiated with joy and awe at the beauty of the world as he was flying through the air. He had awe. His parents had fear.

Knowing our God is so beyond us, but inviting us to an intimacy—that, St. Patrick's, is the awe we're called to have.

In my family the one who especially passed on the faith to all of us was my maternal grandmother. She and our grandfather married right here at St. Patrick's on June 29, 1910. All nineteen grandchildren called her "Paw-Paw." Looking back, I had a fear of Paw-Paw in a very good sense. Not that I was afraid she could hurt me (at that time she was in her 80s!). Rather, I didn't want to live in a way that would disappoint her and be disloyal to the love she had for me. I didn't want to betray how lovingly she saw all of us as her beloved. That was the fear that I had—awe and reverence that didn't want to be untrue to a cherished relationship.

Have you ever experienced an overwhelming sense of awe for the God at work in your life?

Paralyzing fear means that we dread that we won't have enough "frequent flyer points" to *earn* our way into heaven, and God will angrily zap us into the fires of hell. *Awe*, instead, is like that joy and wonder as the 21-year-old skydiver's face showed floating in the grandeur of the sky. Hopefully we have that same awe because we've truly experienced the unconditional love Jesus has for each of us. In baptism, he promised the inheritance to us. Sure, I can turn my back on the promise, and refuse God's love. Jesus is taking the risk that we gratefully embrace his love and the inheritance.

Yes, we're called together each Sunday here at Mass to thank our God for the Savior Jesus. We celebrate his love for us. Then, fed so wondrously each Sunday, we're to go forth in a hurting world and *be* "Eucharist," that is, live out our thanks that we've been loved so recklessly by our Savior.

It's not dread. It's awe. Loved so wildly by our God, we don't have to earn points to get to heaven. We only need to live out our thanks in awe.

General Intercessions

October 31, 2021

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lead us, the church, to live out in our daily witness the two great commandments—loving you, O God, and all our neighbors; we pray to you, O Lord—

Empower world leaders to reverse the climate crisis, and help us to be caring stewards of God’s earth; we pray to you, O Lord—

Lead us as a people to stand up against anti-Semitism and any persecution of people of faith; help us stand with those who suffer due to their race, gender, ethnicity, or their sexual orientation; we pray to you, O Lord—

Strengthen those who are in recovery from addiction; pour you healing grace upon all who are sick—in body or mind; we pray to you, O Lord—

Grant peace and everlasting life to all who have died, especially those who have perished from the coronavirus; we pray to you, O Lord—

