

Sunday, June 3, 2007

Youth Sunday

The other day I heard a news story on the radio about how many employers these days are having trouble keeping workers who are in their twenties unless they give them frequent praise and positive feedback. In trying to figure out why this is so, one consultant suggested that it's because baby boomer parents did everything they could to foster positive self-esteem in their children by bathing them in constant praise. As adults these children now expect the same kind of adulation from their employers.

One can argue about whether we baby boomers went overboard in praising our children's every little drawing, sand castle and bowel movement. I for one think it has resulted in children who are healthier and better adjusted than children who are constantly criticized, put down and humiliated. Perhaps there is a happy medium; but happy mediums are often very difficult to pinpoint.

Still, may be a few less smiley faces and a few more reality checks may be good for a child. Because let's face it, sooner or later your children, my children, all children are going to come face to face with the real world, and sometimes the real world isn't pretty. I'm talking, of course, about the real world of earning a living, paying rent or a mortgage month after month, dealing with insurance adjusters after an accident, getting up at two in the

morning to care for a sick child, or alternatively, reaching the point in life where one has to care for a sick parent. And those are some of the less distressing aspects of life. Shielding our children from all such realities may not be good for them.

The Apostle Paul, so far as we know, was never married and never had any biological children to worry about. Parenting, therefore, wasn't one of his concerns. But as today's epistle lesson from his letter to the Romans suggests, Paul still had good insight into human growth and development. In talking about the human capacity called hope, Paul says that hope begins with suffering. When you stop to think about it, that makes some sense. If a person never suffers, they may not have any reason to hope. Hope usually arises at times of pain, difficulty, or distress. When things go well, hope is less important to us, unless it's the hope that things will keep going well.

Surprisingly, Paul goes so far as to say that we should "boast in our sufferings," we should be glad for the tough times, because they operate the same way that fire operates to make steel. Suffering, Paul says, produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And then Paul adds the clincher, when he says that hope does not disappoint, because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit...."

This reminds me of a sermon I once heard a long time ago when I was in seminary. It was given by a minister in New York City who was also an accomplished pianist and a graduate of the same seminary. He told how one day he was in the seminary lounge playing the piano and no one else was there. When he stopped playing the door opened and Professor James Muilenburg walked in. He had been standing outside the door listening to the music. Professor Muilenburg thanked him for the wonderful music and then made the comment, “You must have suffered a lot to be able to play so well.”

Professor Muilenburg could have meant that the young student must have spent numerous hours of hard work practicing the piano which bore fruit in his playing; or he could have meant that the young student must have suffered a lot of emotional pain in his life to be able to feel the music so deeply that he expressed it in his playing. Maybe he meant both. In any case, it was the suffering he experienced that built character as a musician.

Today we are honoring six young men of our parish who graduate from High School this year. Believe me, this is no small accomplishment. And I want to be the first one to unapologetically praise them, pat them on the back and say “Well done.” For some of them, school itself has been a struggle; each exam, each test, each essay paper has entailed a certain degree

of suffering. But as Paul would say, that's okay. That has built stamina, endurance and character. All of which are sound foundations for hope in the future. The important thing is that they did it; they made it, and we are justifiably proud of each of them.

As these young men and every new graduate go on to the next step in their lives, I hope they will remember Paul's words that "our hope does not disappoint us because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit..." Another way to put it is that where there is love, hope never fails; hope will not be an empty vain hope. As parents, praise and positive feedback for our children are good and proper, but it is our love that matters most. Perhaps parents can overdo the praise and adulation, but no parent ever overdid love. And that's what Paul as much as says about God. God cannot overdo God's love for us because that love was poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

I am only mildly sympathetic to those employers who feel the added burden of having to praise their young employees. A few days after I heard the original news story about that, I also heard some listener responses to that radio report. One young listener commented that if young workers aren't going to get any medical insurance or pension benefits with their jobs, employers should begrudge them a little praise. One could say to that young

listener, “Welcome to the real world.” On the other hand, one also has to admit that he makes a valid point.

As our six young graduates continue on in life and eventually get full-time jobs, they may or may not find employers who are happy to praise them. Of course, no worker should expect their employer to love them. Bosses aren't parents; and they certainly aren't God. My prayer is though that as they go through life and its good times and bad, they will never lose hope. I also pray that they will never lose hope because they will know that God's love has been poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit. For where God's love is, hope never fails.