

“Even Should a Mother Forget”

- Homily

- February 27, 2011

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The other day I was out to dinner with a friend and somehow we got to talking about what was most important to us. I said that the most fundamental thing in my life was trust: to trust in God, to trust in Christ, to trust in others, to trust in life itself, to be a person others could trust. My friend showed some surprise and said, “I’ve never heard you talk about trust in your homilies.” I protested that I so do all the time. The scriptures of today give me a chance to do just that!

“Do not worry about your life... look at the birds of the sky... or the way the wild flowers grow... will not the Father much more provide for you, O you of little faith... do not worry about tomorrow... seek first the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.”

Jesus, who alone is trustworthy, is telling us above and beneath and in all of life’s circumstance, regardless of what they are, to trust in God. We confuse faith with belief. When Jesus calls us “O you of little faith”, he is not questioning our beliefs, but whether they show themselves in trust. He’s really saying “O you of little trust” because that is what faith is about and is for: relying on God, depending on God, knowing we come from and return to God, not standing in ourselves but standing in God, trusting that God is our life, our existence, our goodness. Don’t worry; trust.

We’ll look at the consequences of this in a minute, but first let’s glance back at the first reading which takes trust in God even further, even deeper, and gives us the most telling example of trust in God.

“Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me. Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget I will never forget you’.”

God goes to our most fundamental experience to show us how we need to trust. We learn to trust from our mother’s tenderness toward us as infants. We take in with our mother’s milk the more life-supporting reality—and a fundamental feeling for all of life—that we can trust because our mothers care for us and will never forget us. Yes, God says, that’s how you need to trust me, to know that I will never forsake you.

But God goes beyond even that fundamental experience of being loved by our mothers to show us how much we can trust God: “Even should a mother forget, I will never forget you.” Frankly this loving, caring, never-forgetting foundation for trust in God goes beyond all human experience and calls for a kind of trust which is more than any degree of trust we have in life. The only way we know we can have this kind of trust and are, in practice, enabled to have it is

because of Jesus who alone showed what to trust in this way fully means. Because of his trust, he was caught up beyond death into life as we also shall be. It is not that he did it and is gone; rather he is with us and we in him, so we can trust as he did. Trust is the test and the truth of our Christian living.

Let me bring this back to earth! The other day I was talking with a student, a Junior, named Rebecca. I had to get beyond the ring in her nose and the ring in her eyebrow to fully listen to her... but I made it. Rebecca is working with younger and younger children each year of college and is exploring whether her vocation is to work with the very youngest and the most needy. She goes to the children's refuge down the street as a volunteer, just to be with and play with one, two, and three year olds who are referred there by the courts because of parental abuse or neglect. Rebecca said to me:

“Neglect or not caring is just as bad for an infant as abuse. I see it in children who have not had a bath in a very long time, who always wear the same clothes, who smell of cigarettes, whose ears are so dirty they cannot hear, who have not had enough sleep, children who are not parented by parents but only by television, who can't say a word at the age of two but only can throw tantrums to get the attention they don't get from parents.”

These are children whose mothers have forgotten them, who perhaps are addicted to drugs, or are in prison, or are overwrought working single moms, or they are children shuttled from foster care to foster care. Indeed, Rebecca, you are right, “neglect is as bad as abuse.” God knows it, “Even if a mother should forget you.”

Rebecca says to me:

“What I am trying to do is to reteach them what the role of an adult is in an infant's life, because the only adult they have does not play that role. The biggest thing”, she says to me, “is helping them to have trust, not blind trust, because that is dangerous for them, but knowing when you have genuine caring from an adult and so can trust.”

Rebecca might as well have written the gospel for us... “The Gospel According to Rebecca”... and she nearly wrote this homily on trust for me. Rebecca, it is worth all you have to follow a vocation to reteach trust to neglected, forgotten, uncared for infants.

The faith challenge, the Christian challenge, for all of us no matter how we were cared for as infants, is to trust in God, not quite blind trust in God—though it will often feel like that—but total trust beyond all feeling because of Jesus. He is the only human to whom we can cling, and who alone can guarantee that his Father is fully trustworthy, both with all of our lives and with our real deaths. What does this kind of trust in God do to our lives and call us to be? It drives us to fully unprotected prayer. It helps us to find peace beneath our worries and anxieties. It is the foundation for our compassion and our care for others. It is the basis of our true confidence in ourselves and our trust in life itself. It makes us one with Rebecca in exploring vocations of caring for the littlest and reteaching human goodness. It helps us live the deaths of our beloved and to trust while facing our own deaths.

For some of us trust is easier and for others it is harder because of our earliest, innocent experiences and our make-up and whether life feels benevolent or threatening. We can do little to change these things, but, regardless, we are called to trust God with our lives; none of us are exempted. Even Jesus who could speak of God's care for the birds of the sky and the wild flowers and who showed in a thousand ways that he knew and embraced the goodness of life, was upended and had to trust beyond all feeling. You'd think it would have been easy for him. It wasn't. It's not easy for any of us but it is possible for us because of him. In the end and in all of life faith is trust, and trust is fundamental.

If this homily on trust—to more than make up for my friends' saying I never talk about it—ends up a bit stark and forbidding for us, perhaps a poem by Denise Levertov on trusting God in life will buoy us up and free us for living it:

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.