

## Homily

*Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle B)*

*June 13, 2021*

*St. Mary Parish – Mt. Angel, Oregon*

<i>First Reading</i>	<i>Ez 17:22-24</i>
<i>Responsorial Psalm</i>	<i>Ps 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16</i>
<i>Second Reading</i>	<i>2 Cor 5:6-10</i>
<i>Gospel Reading</i>	<i>Mk 4:26-34</i>

Some of you may not know me. I'm Father Timothy, a monk of Mount Angel Abbey. I'm covering for Fr. Ralph while he is on some much-needed vacation.

During my seminary formation, I was assigned here for three years, and I spent time working in RCIA, religious education and served as a deacon. Archbishop Sample ordained me in May of 2020, but because of Covid, I haven't been able to thank you for being part of my story and helping me in my journey to ordination. **Thank you.** Please pray for me to be the priest that our Lord desires and that the Church deserves.

Let me begin with a comment on the liturgical calendar. It is easy for us to think about the Advent-Christmas cycle where we encounter the mystery of God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ. We see Jesus give up his life for us during Lent and raised from the dead at Easter. With the Ascension and Pentecost, our Lord returns to heaven and sends the Holy Spirit among us, giving birth to the Church, a sign of God's presence on Earth which is meant to spread his Gospel throughout it.

However, when we think about Ordinary Time, it can be hard for us to imagine what that means. Strictly speaking, the "ordinary" part does not mean something run-of-the-mill, unexceptional, or even boring, but merely that the time is "ordered" or numbered. For example, today is the eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time.

A better way to think of Ordinary Time is that it is an *extraordinary* time in the liturgical year dedicated to learning how to be a disciple of Christ. We walk with Jesus in his everyday life among his people and witness his miracles. During Ordinary Time, we marvel at Jesus' teachings. Finally, we walk with him to Jerusalem, where he reveals his true identity as God and man in his death and resurrection. When we think of Ordinary Time, we should be thinking about that time of the year where we hear about Jesus' life and learn what it means to follow him.

Today's readings are all about growth. We hear in the first reading the prophet Ezekiel talking about a time in the history of Israel where it was hard to be hopeful. Nearby powerful

military nations had invaded, destroyed the cities of Israel, killed a lot of people, and sent many into exile. Ezekiel is encouraging his people. That time of sadness will not only go away, but the nation of Israel will once again be great because of God. He says that God will “transplant” Israel to a “high, lofty mountain” where it will become “a majestic cedar,” and all the birds will come and enjoy the shade in its branches. With God, Israel will become a great nation once again, such that everyone will want to be a part of it. The relationship that God had with Israel will be extended throughout the entire world, to us too. All people will know that the Lord is God, there is no other, and his love for his people is without end. This first reading is a message of hope.

This message of hope reminds me of the ice storms we all endured this winter. If you have ever visited Mount Angel Abbey where I live, you will notice a line of sequoias along the hilltop. They are old and quite tall. During the ice storms, we had a lot of damage, but the sequoias all survived. When reading this passage from Ezekiel, I think of those trees. We lost many trees during the ice storm, and many of us were afraid of the possible destruction of our beautiful redwoods. The sequoias lost a few big branches, but they still made it. Those trees did not start tall and majestic as they are today. Monks planted them over a hundred years ago. They began as little saplings, but now they give glory to God and shade and amazement to all who visit us. If you have never seen them, I encourage you to come and visit sometime.

In the gospel reading from Mark today, Jesus talks about growing, too. Jesus is using parables to explain to his followers the mystery of the kingdom of God. This concept, the “kingdom of God,” is mentioned over eighty times in the New Testament! It is a mysterious concept that is not easily understood, so Jesus uses parables to explain. He says the Kingdom is “like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” Like the mighty sequoia, the mustard plant starts small. Here in the United States, we think of the mustard as not much of a plant, but in the Middle East where Jesus lived, the mustard can grow as high as twenty-five feet.

The Kingdom of God refers to God’s presence in the world, in the Church, and our lives. Christianity started small. It was just Jesus, his twelve apostles, and a few other women and men. Today, Christianity has the most followers of any religion, something like over two billion, but it started small. Christianity was an offshoot, or “transplant,” from Judaism but has now become a “majestic cedar.” After Jesus ascended into heaven and the Church was given birth by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church has spread worldwide. Despite all the Church’s struggles throughout history, it remains today and is a lot more vibrant than the news would lead us to believe.

Let us focus on the Kingdom of God in our lives. It starts small. The grace of God is always involved in our lives, no matter who we are. God is constantly revealing himself to us in many ways, and the Church teaches us that we can know that God exists in many ways. One of those ways is through beauty. Once, an atheist – no doubt unwittingly moved by the Holy Spirit – asked me, “won’t heaven be a boring place?” I answered her with the following: I asked her if she had ever seen a work of art, and it was so beautiful that she couldn’t stop looking at it? I asked her if she had ever

heard a song that was so wonderful she kept playing it over and over? She admitted she had, and then she became quiet and stopped asking me questions because it was something she had to ponder. I never talked with her again, but I wonder if it led her to believe in God.

What about us? What is it about getting up early to watch the sunrise behind Mount Hood that is so special? How about the Oregon coast? Even in the winter, people flock to the beauty of our beaches, not just because there might be a casino nearby. Even the lightning storms I've seen in Florida when visiting my parents are worth sitting and watching. Something is astonishing about tremendous claps of thunder. Beauty attracts us.

The beauty of nature should lead us to find God, the source of beauty. Beauty puts us in a frame of mind where we are filled with wonderment and are ready to seek the truth. This search for truth is put into our hearts by God, the source of truth, and the people who heard Jesus tell the parable of the mustard seed are no different from us today. That search for truth in our hearts is like the mustard seed which can grow into something large and beautiful.

The one who responds in faith to God has to cultivate that faith. It is not enough for us to hear Jesus speak and feel good. Yes, Jesus is God, and he *should* make us feel good. Like any plant, for it to grow, it must be fertilized and watered. It needs sun, and we have to kill the bugs that try to eat it.

The Church teaches six “precepts” of the practicing Catholic: we are to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation at least once a year, receive the Eucharist at least during the Easter season, fast, and abstain from certain foods at certain times, provide for the spiritual and financial needs of the Church, and observe the Church’s teachings concerning marriage.

We need more, though. To be a “devout” Catholic, we must nurture a life of prayer. It seems obvious but is easier said than done, for me too. We live in a world full of distractions. Even though we have all kinds of technological gizmos that are supposed to make our lives easier, we seem busier than ever. How does anyone have any time to pray?

Well, it starts small. When we get up early to watch that Mount Hood sunrise, that’s a good time to give our day to God, sometimes called a morning offering. It doesn’t have to be a formal, memorized thing. In the responsorial psalm today, we hear a morning offering. The psalmist says, “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praise to your name...to proclaim your kindness at dawn and your faithfulness throughout the night.”

The Kingdom of God is not just a place; it is a *relationship* with Jesus. Jesus is the one who loved us so much that he gave everything – even his very life – for us so that we could be more like him and live with him in eternal life. Relationships take time and care, though. It is not enough for me to say, “I love you.” I have to prove that by spending time with you, by doing loving things, by thinking about you. Spending time together in prayer with Jesus proves our love. It starts small: the

morning offering, praying before meals, before bed, that sort of thing. Then, like the mustard seed, our prayer life grows. The more we spend time with the one we love, the more we grow in love.

Anyone who has been madly in love with someone can be pretty annoying to others because they can't stop talking about their beloved. Anyone who has been madly in love does all kinds of great things. Not only do they buy gifts for their beloved, but they also become better people, better workers, better family members, better citizens. It starts small, but it can't stay that way. When we are faithful in the small kinds of prayer, the Kingdom of God – Christ's presence in our hearts – grows so that we can do the big things. Jesus shows us this in his life and his death. He started all by himself, walking along the beach. The ones who followed him became many, such that his ministry of love continues even today, in the billions.

I recommit myself, and I want to encourage all of us to recommit our lives to prayer, to spend more time every day with Jesus, the one who loves us. Our faith will become powerful when we do so, like the mustard tree; it will become strong, like the sequoia. A continuous, everyday life of prayer will fill our hearts so much with love that it will spill out everywhere. We will want to spread that love to everyone we meet. We will feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison (cf. Mt 25:31-46). We will love so much that we will be willing, like Jesus, to give *everything*. Filled with the love of Jesus, we will be confident standing before him on that last day where “we must all appear before [his] judgment seat” and receive from him “according to what we [have done]” here on earth.

As Christians, when we love as Jesus does, we can experience heaven here on earth. Our love for God and each other can be so great that the world will look at the Church – and *we* are the Church – like my atheist friend who knew that beauty could lead to God, and they will want that love, too. They will want that love so much that they will exclaim like the psalmist does “There is one thing I ask of the Lord, only this do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” (cf. Ps 27).

As Catholics, we experience heaven on earth every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. The eternal invades our time. Although seemingly ordinary and small, the bread and wine become the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus. When we receive the Eucharist, we take God into our bodies and become more like him. Friends in Christ, this is the meaning of life. God created us because he loves us, and he proves that love on the cross. Receiving the Eucharist gives us the grace to live as he lived, to love as he loved. As we approach the altar of grace in this extraordinary time to feed on the body and blood of Christ, let us ask him to give us the grace to spend more time every day with him. God, who is faithful, will provide it.