

Homily  
Feast of St. Catherine of Siena  
May 10, 2022  
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The celebration of the feast of St. Catherine Siena and the readings of today cry out to us.

Catherine's experience of a mystical marriage with Christ, launched her on a new public career. She cared for the poor and sick, attracting a large band of disciples. Later, she received a divine commission to help heal the world and the Church.

Gamaliel admonished the Sanhedrin – to be careful about how they treated the apostles. Saying if this endeavor is of human origin, it will dissipate but if it is of God, they might find themselves fighting against God. The Apostles did not stop teaching and proclaiming Christ.

The miracle of the loaves and the fish prefigured the Last supper. But it was more a sign of the abundance of God's love. God not only fills our physical hunger, but our hunger for meaning our hunger for God.

The message of the readings and the celebration of Catherine's Feast speak to us of service. But it is critical to know why we serve. Do we take time to discern why we serve? Is it because we want others to notice how generous we are, or because we need the approval of persons in authority, perhaps we need to please our friends? Often, these motives are insufficient to the challenges before us. Sometimes, we come up against a situation that forces us to ask if we can be true to our commitments.

Joan Chittister, in *There is a Season*, shares a story about the service that might give us pause.

"he never does anything nice" for her but never does anything nice for herself either. Making her happy, she thinks, is his job. These people give someone else the responsibility for their lives and consume everything in sight for their own purposes. They take and take and take and give nothing back. They want marriages with "roles" clearly defined to suit them.

The other barrier to holy friendship is low self-esteem. What we do not have within us we do not have to give another. All we can do is to attach ourselves to someone else for refuge or for identity. Neither attachment is enough to deserve an eternity of affection. And so, sooner or later clearly or imperceptibly, the relationship unravels and is seen for what it is: A skeleton of a partnership. When a marriage is designed so that one life must be lost so that the other can be lived, marriage has become a misnomer for domestication.

Ironically enough then, a friendship that is not independent is not a friendship at all and more important than that, perhaps, in today's confusion of sex roles and self-development, a marriage that depends on the obliteration of one of the partners is no partnership at all. She is more than a mother; she is a person with talents and ideas. He is more than a provider; he is a man with feelings and fears. A marriage based on friendship provides the possibility for both and stifles neither.

“Marriage,” Joseph Barth wrote, “is our last best chance to group up.” It is, in other words, our golden hope for fulfillment in a union that commits but does not bind that links but does not limit us from becoming the person that each of us was meant to be.

The spiritual effects of love are legion but three have special meaning. To know love is to know trust that is dizzy and free. Once we have loved one another we can love the world. Once we have discovered unexpected treasure, we presume to find it everywhere. The love becomes a natural resource, an element of the universe, an energy that I learn to mine from person to person in my life.

But if seeing glory in someone else is our invitation to appreciate the glory in the whole world then a sense of God’s marvels in me is an invitation to understand the meaning of heaven here. Right here and now. To be loved by someone is to become new again. To know the gleam that comes with being worthwhile, to discover what it is to be wonderful.

“What does your fiancé’ like about you?” the mother asked her moonstruck son.

“she thinks I’m handsome, talented, clever, and a good dancer,.” He said dreamily.

“And what do you like about her?” the mother said.

“That she thinks I’m handsome, talented, clever, and a good dancer!” the boy said.

The message is only partially untrue. Love not only saves us from the smallness of ourselves and gives us the courage to risk ourselves on others. Love teaches us as well the grandeur of a God who does miracles through the unlikely likes of a limited me. It gives us esteem, admiration, regard, and respect. Love makes us feel beautiful, feel regal. It lifts us out of the humdrum of the ordinary to drown us with surprise and fullness of life. It brings with it a cataract of approval and pride and affirmation and attention that makes long days easy and hard times possible. Love enables us to love ourselves, the fundamental preparation for being able to love anybody else.

Finally, love shows us into the heart of God. The Hasidic masters tell the story of the rabbi who disappeared every Shabbat Eve, “to commune with God in the forest,” his congregation thought. So, one Sabbath night they deputed one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman, sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once there, the rabbi cooked for her and carried her firewood and swept her floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue.

Back in the village, the people demanded of the one they’d sent to follow him, “Did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?”

“Oh, no,” the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause. “our rabbi went much, much higher than that.”

The rabbi’s message sears the soul: Love is not for our own sakes. Love frees us to see others as God sees them.

To love is to come to see beyond and despite good taste, good sense, and good judgement. Love sees us as we are, as we really are, and as we can be, as well.

Love sees little but good in us and forgives everything that is not. We watch it happen every day and, from a dry and loveless perch in our desiccated souls, pronounce it ridiculous when, perhaps, we should proclaim it holy. Foolish love, in fact, may be all we ever know of the love of God on earth and in the end, it will be everything each of us needs. In the end it will indeed be “the bridge, the survival, the meaning.”