

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 13, 2017
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I have lived most of my life in cities: Memphis, St. Louis, New Orleans. I appreciate getting away to a quiet place – the mountains, the beach, the desert or some other out of the way location, but I cannot imagine living there. I enjoy cities – the energy, the culture, the sporting events, the museums. In a city there is always something to do, places to go, people to watch, crime scenes to avoid. Some people can't stand cities because they are too crowded or are too dirty or are too noisy. A city is never quiet. Your ears are constantly bombarded by the sounds of airplanes and traffic, conversations and music. It takes a lot for a city to get quiet – which is why a common way of commemorating a tragedy or loss, these days, is to observe a moment of silence. In a culture that is ordinarily filled with noise, the absence of any sound speaks more powerfully than any marching band or collective outburst ever could. It is in the silence, in the stillness, that God touches the human heart.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus sent the disciples off in a boat so that he could have some quiet time to pray. That's appealing, isn't it? There are times, I suspect, when we'd all like to send our friends and loved ones off in a boat so that we can have some peace and quiet. It usually doesn't work that way, however. And, of course, it always seems a little strange to us when we hear that Jesus prayed – he is God, after all. Why would he bother praying? We forget, somehow, that having fully assumed a human nature, Jesus needed to pray, to reconnect with the Father. It wasn't just that Jesus wanted to pray or that he enjoyed prayer or that he was particularly good at it – although all of those were undoubtedly true. The bottom line is that Jesus needed to pray. There is in each human heart a God-sized hole that only God can fill, that only God can complete – and that hole, that longing will go unfulfilled if we continue to run at ninety miles an hour and fill our lives with activity and our eyes with distractions and our ears with extraneous sounds and all the while bemoaning that God doesn't seem to respond to our cries. How would we possibly know? Maybe we don't give God a chance, or maybe we're just searching for him in the wrong places.

In our first reading, Elijah looked first for the Lord in the strong wind and then in the earthquake and then in the fire – but God was not to be found in any of them. Elijah discovered that the Lord passed by when there was but a tiny, whispering sound – a sound delicate and comforting, a sound so profound that Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went to the entrance to the cave. It was a sound

Elijah would have missed entirely if he had been concentrating on the wind or the fire or the earthquake – and, honestly, wouldn't we have still been concentrating on the wind and the fire and the earthquake?

Our first reading doesn't tell us what happened after Elijah was quiet and listened for God. We aren't told here the results of his prayer, but we know the results of Jesus' prayer. The time Jesus spent in prayer was so enriching, so invigorating, so peaceful, that he could walk on the surface of a choppy sea. While the disciples were tossed about in their boat, Jesus walked calmly on the water. There's a recommendation for prayer if I ever heard one. Prayer both calmed and energized Jesus to such an extent that the strong winds and rough waters of every day life left him completely unfazed. His relationship with the Father was so strong that neither the elements of nature nor the fears and doubts of his Apostles could shake him. Prayer enabled our Lord to walk on water.

Most of us, I dare say, do not walk on water – though sometimes we pretend that we do. Pretences aside, we do not have a prayer life like that of Jesus, one so vibrant, so peaceful. Most of us revel in the distractions and, if truth be told, we're more like the apostles in that boat. As fishermen, a little rough water didn't bother them. They'd lived through many violent storms – this one wasn't that bad. They weren't frightened by the wind or the waves, they were frightened by Jesus walking calmly in the midst of them. It wasn't the chaos that frightened them, it was peace in the midst of it. That's what keeps most of us from prayer, is it not? We don't fear the energy or the excitement or the noise; we fear the peace and quiet. We fear what we might hear God say if we took the time to listen for that tiny, whispering sound. We fear God because we do not yet trust him. And even when we stick our necks out, when we place one foot on the surface of the water, we begin to sink because, like Peter, we cannot imagine putting ourselves completely at God's mercy. We fear our lack of control because we know both our own sinfulness and our own failure to forgive. We fear God because we dread that he might be like us – that he might be as stingy with his mercy as we are with ours. As he spoke to the apostles that night in Galilee, so he speaks to us: Take courage, do not be afraid. We need not fear either the noise or the quiet, the activity or the calm, for God is there in the midst of all of it – gently calling to us in the tiny, whispering sound.