Pastor's Pen: Thoughts From the Trail

Greetings from the high country of Utah! It is a crisp morning (around 52 degrees) and the smell of Pine, Douglas Firs, and Aspens fill the air with a pleasant aroma. With the exception of the chirping of the occasional Mountain Jay, it is so very quiet up here at this moment. I have been blessed with some wonderful hikes through scenic vistas that pictures can't do justice. I have found it easier to get sunburned (being at 785 ft. elevation at home, 8500 ft. at the cabin, and hiking at 9-11k feet will do that) and found out that even with a shirt on I can sunburn my shoulders, back, and chest. It has caused me to have to readjust hiking times.

The hikes and quiet time (neither Fr. Veit nor I have turned on the TV once) have given me the luxury of having time to reflect and more deeply pray. It has given me time to evaluate both my personal life and my leadership as a pastor. In both, I strive to be better today than I was yesterday. I have also had time to read. It has been my reading that provokes this pastor's pen.

At the Home and School meeting at ICS, I had a good friend of mine, Mr. Alan Lammers, give a presentation on a book we have since bought for school parents (who requested one) called "The Anxious Generation" by Dr. Jonathan Haidt. It is a book about the devastation that both social media and smart devices are doing physiologically to children and psychologically to teens. I agree with most of his findings, but understand that Dr. Haidt is an atheist. Nowhere more does that come into play than when he delves into the importance of spirituality. He can tell us how and why spirituality is important, but as an atheist, he paints himself into a logical corner. He can't tell why we have what he calls the "god sized hole" in our being. I can't condemn him for that, seeing as how I was in that same boat as a young man who was agnostic.

However, as someone who made that trip out of disbelief to belief, I know why it is there. I borrow heavily from St. Augustine's, "The Confessions" in my response. One of the more famous quotes from "The Confessions" is, "our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." This is where the whole "god sized hole" idea comes from. It is this quote that resonates with why that hole is there, "*Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made. I rushed headlong – I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with you. They held me back far from you, those things which would have no being, were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace*." That hole is there because God puts it there.

God wants a relationship with each and every one of us. He doesn't want a relationship built on convenience nor mutual interest. He wants something deeper, a relationship built on mutual self-giving love. That love has a yearning to it, a deep need for the other that is so profound that only the other can sate it. It is a burning love that is willing to sacrifice and even

suffer for the beloved. The Scriptures liken this to the intensity of love between a bride and a bridegroom and the love between a husband and wife. God wants us to yearn for Him as He yearns for us. He shows the depths of the yearning as Christ the bridegroom offers Himself for us on the Cross and in the Eucharist. He doesn't want to be an obligation or mere duty. He doesn't want to be a hobby or side project. No, He wants us to be consumed in love for Him as He is for us. Hence the continual image used throughout the Bible, ending with the marriage of Christ to HIs Bride (His Church) at the end of the Scriptures.

Our God knows we are flawed. He knows we can turn that love to the created order in favor of Him. He knows we lack omniscience and struggle with the desire to sin (called concupiscence) and will try to fill the God sized hole with that which is not Him. Hence He gives us grace, especially in the form of the sacramental life of the Church. In no other place will we be able to fill the God-sized hole than in the Eucharist. In listening to Fr. Clark's homily last week, he gave a beautiful understanding of how we turn to God in our brokenness and need; full of love that expresses itself in both our thanksgiving and sorrow for sin. We don't come to the Divine Physician to be entertained, but to be made whole. The rituals of the Mass point to this divine exchange and reality. When someone says they get nothing out of Mass it tells me they don't get what is supposed to be happening.

That hole can be created anew through mortal sin. The scriptures liken sin to marital infidelity. We know the horrible results of infidelity; the grave harm caused to the relationship. However, unlike in our relationships, where forgiveness is so hard, God keeps reaching out to us out of His love for us, wanting His beloved back in His home and under His protection. He gives us a method to do this through the sacrament of Reconciliation. This is my preferred name for Confession. Why? Because the end of this sacrament is to reconcile a relationship lost through sin. It is the call of God to His beloved to restore the relationship. The ritual is necessary as it is in the Eucharist. Good preaching and good music don't fill the God sized hole: God's grace does. In His love for us, He gives us a concrete way of knowing this grace and forgiveness.

Sometimes, though, we suffer the results of others' sins toward us. Sometimes, despite our best efforts we still suffer. That can leave an emptiness of anxiety. It is like my getting sunburn despite using greater degrees of SPF (at this point I am going to use whitewash and a brush) and wearing shirts. I did what I thought I needed to do and still got sunburned. Life is like that. Going back to Fr. Clarks' homily, what we bring to Mass is not just our thanksgiving, but that anxiety and worry as an act of trust that God truly does love us and will give us the grace to navigate the storms that come as a result of life. Our love is shown in our trust; in allowing Him to be the fulfillment of all our hopes and desires. This is something that one who has self-giving love does.

In allowing God to fill that God-sized hole, as only He can, we find that eternal familial and marital bond. It is a bond that He seals in His own flesh and blood. But why does this matter? That is next week's pastor's pen (which I am writing right after this).

Pastor's Pen: More thoughts from the Trail

As I wrote at the end of the Pastor's pen for last week, this week's is being written at the same time as the previous column. They flow from one another. In the last column, I wrote about how God places within us a "God-sized hole" so that we strive for Him and allow Him to fill that abyss with his deep love for us. He makes us complete. I wrote about how sin and sorrow can bring division and doubt; but how God uses His grace to rebind and give us strength. Why is it important that we allow God to do so?

The primary reason is that the relationship with God (or lack thereof) informs and replicates in our human bonds and relationships. Going back to the Dr. Haidt book I mentioned last week, even though he is a professed atheist, he can not get around how the breakdown of spirituality (fueled more so by social media and smart devices) has profound implications for the society in which we live. The more disembodied our reality becomes, the more the tapestry of society flies apart. When we attempt to fill the God-sized hole with the things of this world, everything and everyone becomes a means to that end. Everything is judged by what it does for me. Even the role of religion is judged by such a standard. All relationships, even with God Himself, become a means of self-satisfaction. That is why many turn to the Divine Physician to be entertained and not cured. They mistakenly think it is one and the same.

The more self-consumed we become, the more anxious and frustrated we become. Trying to fill the hole with that which cannot do so breeds anger and frustration with God and with everyone else around us. By the same token, when we allow God to fill that hole, it also breeds a fulfillment and joy that expresses itself in every other relationship.

This is at the core of the stewardship way of life that the diocese has been talking about for the last several years. Stewardship is a natural result of allowing God to fill the God-sized hole. Fulfillment and joy born of thanksgiving is as infectious as a baby's laugh. It is a simple yet profound joy that gives witness. It is a beacon in the midst of the storms that plague us in life. The love given us that fulfills us will spur us to bring others into that same relationship. For example, when the Samaritan woman at the well allowed Jesus to give her that eternal spring of water to sate her longing, her immediate response was to go back into the village and tell others. It is an interesting side note, brought up in Brant Pitre's book "Jesus the Bridegroom" that in the Scriptures, wells were where men oftentimes met prospective wives (Isaac, Jacob, Moses). Jesus sees in the multiple time married woman a person in need of such a relationship. She should have been the last person called; however the mission of Christ to bring us all into an eternal covenant bond with God was to be extended to even the most broken among us.

Allowing God to fill us and bring us into that covenant bond changes the way we look at others, even the most broken among us. It is why the tell tale marks of such love are expressed in forgiveness, mercy, and charity. Our bishop, in his desire to have every parish be a place of mercy and charity, a place where life presents to us in the way of the Beatitudes, and a place where our stewardship facilitates such a parochial calling, calls us to live as if we have truly allowed the love of God to fulfill our longings and in that love, seek to spread it with the same fervor as the woman at the well.

This requires us to measure reality not by what others can do for me, but how can who I am benefit others. How can the marital covenant bond I live as a member of the Body of Christ influence others around me and build up that same Body of Christ? The stronger this bond becomes between God and us the stronger will be made the bond we have with each other and how we extend that bond to others out there searching for something to fill that God-sized hole.

Our presence and participation in Mass builds that covenant bond in allowing Christ to give us the grace to live in that bond and extend it to others. This is why Mass attendance is living the stewardship way of life: it is the source and summit of the grace we need to enable us to be the bride Jesus calls us to be. That is why entering to offer our thanksgiving and trust despite our anxieties and not to be passive onlookers to be entertained is so very important. It is the fuel we need to get about the business of the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is why our direct participation, not just at Mass, but throughout the week, in helping our parish to do what it is supposed to do is important. This is why I so loathe the idea of a parish as a business. It is why that visage of the parish as a family bond is grounded in the truth we have already talked about. In a functional and loving family, we don't just participate in the life of the family when there is something in it for me; but we combine our efforts in what is to the good of the family bond. This is why stewardship calls for that participation (call it volunteering if you wish). If we are to be a place of charity, mercy, and evangelization then it can not be done by only part of the family, but by each member.

Finally, this is why tithing matters. It is our material support for the mission of the family. Tithing isn't about paying bills or stockpiling funds. It is about funding the mission. It is about enabling us as the bride of Christ to do what must be done and make known what we are charged with making known. All of the charity and formation (both adult and youth) we have been able to do is enabled by the tithing. How we use our funds speaks to our priorities and hopes. My hope, as a pastor, is that we are so engaged in stewardship and hence a place of mercy and charity, that we will witness what it looks like when we allow God to be the fulfillment of all our desires and allow HIm to fill that God-sized hole. That, my friends, will fill our pews and our empty seats at the family table.