

Sermon: September 25, 2022 "The inside spirit"

The words from today's Gospel are reflected in the song we just sang. The Gospel says, "The kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, " Look! here it is, or there it is" ... because the kingdom of God is within you."

These are Jesus' words. It is interesting to me, thinking about the church and religion over the years. It is easy to take Jesus and idolize him, and turn him into something he was never meant to be. Jesus did not ask people to worship him. Jesus wanted people to worship God. Jesus came here ... not to be worshipped. He came here to open people's hearts and souls to the goodness of God's spirit.

Where is the kingdom of God? Jesus says, "The kingdom of God lives inside of you." The kingdom of God comes alive in the way we walk, in the way we talk, in the way we take care of each other.

I realize I am the pastor of the church. But you know what is even more important to me? Being a member of this church. Every week Peggy and I, like many of you, get our offering envelope out and write a check to the church. I do this as a member of the church. And I think to myself, "Don, what kind of return do you get on the investment you make in the church?" Well, obviously, it pays my salary. But the real question is: this church we support ---- what difference does it make when we walk out the door after worship on Sunday? Do you get your money's worth? Does your investment in this place make a difference in the way you work and take care of your family every day?

I am thinking about all this, as walk around on Friday. I see Ricardo and his crew cutting the grass and trimming the bushes. I see the roofers on the gym ... replacing all twelve of the leaking sky lights. The mum sale last week, the bake sale this week, Halloween Bingo coming up at the end of October, a dinner celebrating 60 years in November. Why do we do all of this? I can't speak for all of you, but as a member of the church, I need a safe place to be. I need a place where I am accepted for who I am. I need a place where I know I am going to be okay. I need a place where I don't have to pretend ... where, despite my imperfections, I can be true to myself. A place empowering me and nudging me to give unto others rather than thinking only of myself.

Yesterday I did one of my favorite things ... I watered the flowers ... out front and in back of the church. Some of the flowers are getting tired. They are nearing the end of their season. There are other flowers looking bolder than ever. Some of them, when you water in the middle of the day, seem to grow before your very eyes. As I looked at the mixture of tired flowers and flowers that keep coming back ... my thoughts turned to Ukraine. The people, their president --- every day: fighting for their lives, never giving up.

I think of Bonnie and Jimmy – getting married right smack-dab in the middle of her journey with cancer. They will not let cancer define who they are or what they want to do. As I watered the flowers, I thought of the two 16-year-old kids whose pictures hang outside of my office. Both of them literally went to school the day before they died, because they knew in their hearts how precious each day is. I thought of Mattie Stepanek, 13 years old, who wrote poetry and prayers that will last a lifetime. Yes, these flowers symbolize the strength and beauty of the human spirit.

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There is a guy named John who walks around our property twice a day. He has his baseball hat on and a cup of coffee in his hand. He does it early in the day and again later in the afternoon. We always say hi to each other. So, the other day I ask him why he chooses our property as his path of choice. "You don't mind me walking here, do you?" "Of course, not!!" Then he says to me: "It just feels good to be on your church property ... it's a feel-good spot." I reply: "John, if you think it feels good on the outside, you should experience how it feels on the inside!!" (Offering envelopes will be next.)

I think of his words ... "it just feels good to be here." Yes, it does feel good to be here. To be enriched by a spirit ----- refreshing us, empowering us, giving us hope.

Speaking of the "inside." I have discovered after all these years of looking for sermon ideas, trying to find God, looking for God's spirit in all kinds of spaces and places ... we can preach and talk religion all we want. What we really need is to step back and discover that God's spirit is inside our heart and it's inside our soul. With humility and grace ... we need to let the spirit in, so we can go out and be the church, and make our little corner of the kingdom a better place. I do know this: it feels good to be here ... every day. Amen.

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