

Spirit Celebration Homily – September 12, 2017

For only being September 12, it's been quite a Fall already. Four hurricanes, for example – so far, anyway: Harvey, Irma, Jose, Katia. Harvey we know about well and so too now, increasingly, with Irma; Jose and Katia would have been big news in their own rights, but didn't attract much attention given the other two. I know that there are those among you – students, faculty and staff – who had family and friends in harm's way and that you stood nervous vigil for them and continue to feel close to them now, praying for the rebuilding ahead or thankful that rebuilding won't be necessary. Toss in the worst earthquake in generations in Mexico – perhaps some of you know people impacted by it – and that's quite a litany of disasters for a month.

And then there were those three other hurricanes (so far). Not nature's disasters this time but ours, ones that we made. Charlottesville: where just before we all showed up to begin the new year, Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and the KKK made common cause to Unite the Right (as they saw it), or to take hate mainstream (as the rest of us did). The DACA recession: where Lady Liberty put down her torch and, with both hands, pulled the rug out from under hundreds of thousands of young people who have only known life in this country and who want nothing more than the freedom to pursue their dreams the way the rest of us can. Title IX: and then, days later, the opening salvo of what I fear may become a campaign to open the door more on safeguarding those accused of sexual assault by closing the door more on those who have been assaulted. Add the sad, tragic death last week of Jim Riordan – a member of the University community who touched the lives of many and for whose soul and its repose you and I might reserve a quiet prayer at this celebration today – and it has been quite a month since the first-year students arrived. Strange days indeed, as John Lennon once sang.

What are we to make of all of this – beyond the fact that we are all of us carrying a lot as a result of these days, and so all of us – faculty, staff, students – probably need to exercise an extra-generous bit of that good old Jesuit TLC “Cura Personalis” (Care of the Person) with one another and with ourselves these days. True enough. But – again – what are we to make of it?

This, I think. When the first of those several hurricanes struck – not Harvey, I mean, but Charlottesville – and I sorted through my outrage and my sorrow, it was as if all over again I learned how vitally important what Xavier University is and therefore what we do together is, how very much this nation, this world, needs a Xavier.

Ah, but what's a Xavier? There's a variety of ways of answering that question, of course. It's a university here in Cincinnati in the Jesuit Catholic tradition. It's a place where we hope to see all of us become people of learning and reflection, integrity and achievement, in solidarity for and with others. It's a university that came within a whisker of finally breaking through into the Final Four last year, if only we had beaten Gonzaga – which I guarantee you all that one day we will do, beat Gonzaga and finally break into the Final Four, both. There are surely many more ways of answering the question “What's a Xavier?” But today, let's interrogate our Scriptures with that question, shall we, and see what answers we find.

Our selection from Deuteronomy is a good place to begin, for this excerpt from the conclusion of Moses' farewell discourse at a covenant renewal at Moab fits well with our own

renewal of purpose here today as we together enter the new land of a new year. For Israel, Moses reminded them, the Law is not without but within. And so it is I think with Xavier – not without but within. Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, who led the Jesuits worldwide until little less than a year ago, once remarked that all Jesuit works, and our schools especially, should be about the business of conversion. Nicolás did not mean by this that Jesuit works should make sure that Presbyterians and Muslims, Buddhists and Baptists all become Catholic; rather, he meant that Jesuit works should help Presbyterians and Muslims, Buddhists and Baptists and Catholics and more, all become fully human, all be converted to their own deepest humanity, something very much within. And so, what's a Xavier with this in mind? A Xavier is what arises when you and I commit ourselves to this ongoing project of conversion to our own deepest and best humanity, in others of course but in ourselves first and foremost.

Paul's advice to the Corinthians uses the analogy of a body to counsel them to stop seeing their differences as things that divide them and instead revere them for their complementarity. The Kingdom project before that community required them all. That is no less true here. We are students, faculty and staff; we are young and old and every age in between; we are native born and immigrant and citizens of dozens of other nations; we run a gamut of ethnic identities; we are gay and straight; cis-gendered men and women and transgendered people; support staff and full professors – and all of this is only to begin to name the rich tapestry of our diversities. As we saw last year, those diversities can all too easily separate us. But, as we also saw last year in the remarkable coming together that followed hard on the heels of that division, there is a power that comes to us when we affirm our common humanity that can come to us in no other way whatsoever. And so, again, what's a Xavier? A Xavier is what happens when we work together, with and through our differences, because only then can we succeed in fulfilling the words of the Student Commitment and change the world, enact in our day our Kingdom project.

In Matthew's Gospel, we eavesdrop on Jesus preaching his Sermon on the Mount and the two images we hear are familiar to us: salt and light. But in what does the savor of our salt consist, do you think? And what is the shine of our light exactly? This, I think. As each of us becomes fully converted to our own humanity, and as we become converted to our common humanity together across all those characteristics that can divide us, something important happens. We open doubly – we open out and we open up. We open out to our neighbor around us, to those who must always have a claim upon us and to the poor especially, those pushed aside, rejected or marginalized in whatever way, whoever they might be. But we open up as well, which is to say we open up to the Divine, however it is we might name it. And this double opening up and out is ultimately not two things but one, for both openings are never complete but on-going, always claiming us – our hearts, our minds, our wills – for a more that is never satisfied but with more. And so, what again is a Xavier? It is what this place becomes when we allow that which is always beyond us – our neighbor, our God – to occupy the center of our lives and hold sway over us.

Sunday night, I hosted my first dinner of the new school year for students who live in the Commons, and it was helpful for me to hear how things are going for them. The pattern is familiar to me, after spending the great bulk of my life around universities. The academic year up to Labor Day is a kind of hors d'oeuvre that sets the table for what comes afterwards. And after Labor Day, people settle down into the work that is before them. For the students, of course, that work is overwhelmingly class prep – studying, group work, writing papers, getting

ready for the first battery of exams. But it's also all the other stuff they do in their very busy lives: club sports, side jobs, campus groups, and, of course, their friends. By now they're learning to juggle it all. And the new year feels good for them as a result.

I suspect that their experience is ours. All of us are settling down into the work that is ours to do during the course of this still-new academic year, and that work is as diverse as we are. It happens in thousands of ways across the campus, practically every minute of every hour of every day – meeting, planning, reading, teaching, grading, cleaning, fixing, counseling, supporting, listening, speaking, cooking, serving, challenging, encouraging, mowing, trimming, practicing, coaching, on and on and on and on.

But against all that work, all that activity, all that energy – no matter whose it is, no matter what it is, no matter when it is – there is always a kind of holy horizon at the edge, the dome of our world here so to speak, against which our work takes its meaning. Who you and I are now. Who you and I are called to be. And how you and I are called to be that together, for the sake of a world that itself must become more fully human and more fully free. Good for us, then, to keep our eyes focused on the details before us, for it is in and through and with all those innumerable details that the “what” of Xavier University becomes real. But also good – not better; just also good – to lift our eyes up from the daily details and gaze outward toward that horizon, and remember not only the what of Xavier, but the why. Which is, of course, the why of ourselves as well.