

- 1) Several years ago a priest friend of mine went to visit a college buddy of his.
  - a) The guy was married, had a couple of kids,
    - i) and since he had gone to a Catholic college,
    - ii) and may even have spent some time in the seminary with my friend,
    - iii) he and his family were practicing Catholics.
  - b) Well, come Sunday morning,
    - i) there my friend is sitting at the breakfast table with his friend and his family,
    - ii) when the oldest kid announces
      - (1) that he does not want to go to mass.
      - (2) That none of his friends go to mass,
      - (3) and thus he is not going either.
    - iii) When his younger sister hears him,
      - (1) she says that if he is not going to mass,
      - (2) she isn't either.
  - c) Well, my friend's friend tried to reason with them,
    - i) but we all know where that led.
  - d) Finally, at his wit's end, the father yelled,
  - e) "Look. I understand.
    - i) I don't want to go to mass.
    - ii) You don't want to go to mass.
    - iii) NOBODY WANTS to go to mass.
    - iv) But by God as long as you live under MY roof in MY house you'd better damn well be sure that you are going to go to mass . . . isn't that right, father?"
- 2) What's a priest to say? Of course the guy is right. Catholics have an obligation to attend mass every Sunday. It is right there in the Catechism. Not to do so is a violation of the third commandment and technically, a mortal sin; yep one of the big ones.
- 3) And yet, my friend knew what his friend's son knew, and what all of us know.
  - a) That that is one commandment that gets broken all the time.
  - b) Current statistics state that about 40 percent of American Catholics are at mass on any given Sunday. Which means of course that over half are not.
  - c) Many people are proud of that number, especially since the numbers in Europe are far lower. And yet, I cannot help but wonder
  - d) How many of that 40 percent had conversations like my friend's friend that morning?
  - e) How many come solely out of force of habit?
  - f) How many people attend mass,
    - i) solely because they feel they have to make the next payment on their Catholic life Insurance Policy;
    - ii) you know, one hour a week and you keep your soul out of hell?
- 4) I would bet that there are many.
  - a) And yet, we do not live in a world especially here in New York,
    - i) where attendance at any religious service is the norm.
  - b) The state does not demand it, our friends do not expect it,
    - i) in many cases even our families no longer guilt us into it.

- 5) And yet tens of thousands of people are at churches in this city this morning.
- 6) One wonders why.
  - a) In some cases, undoubtedly it is the splendor of the music
    - i) In others, perhaps the powerful preaching.
  - b) In some cases it is the beautiful architecture.
    - i) In others still it might be the social programs, or the educational opportunities.
  - c) But even so many people attend churches where the music is poor, the preaching mediocre, and the programs and opportunities few. Why?
  - d) Perhaps for the same reason so many people left their towns and villages, left Jerusalem itself to the Jordan River to hear and see John the Baptist.
- 7) At the Jordan River there was no beautiful architecture; no stirring choir music.
  - a) John was undoubtedly a preacher; when he was arrested by King Herod, he was kept alive solely because Herod liked to hear him preach;
  - b) And we know because of the way he dressed and ate, with the camel skins and the locusts and wild honey like some desert prophet, that he was something of a showman.
  - c) And yet, his message was simple:
    - i) God is coming to set up God's kingdom;
    - ii) God is going to do this by punishing sinners and purifying this sinful world.
      - (1) So come; confess your sins; be washed, get ready.
    - iii) Not exactly the kind of uplifting message you expect would draw people in.
  - d) And yet still they came;
    - i) And it was because they heard something in John's message, something that Jesus made the basis of his preaching after John was arrested.
      - (1) What they heard was that the Kingdom of Heaven had drawn near.
- 8) but according to Jesus, it was not the kingdom that John had promised;
  - a) It did not come with punishment and purifying fire.
  - b) It did not come with an avenging king and world conquest.
  - c) It came in the person of Jesus himself,
    - i) who invites us all to be a part of that kingdom;
      - (1) Where the focus is not a throne but a meal
      - (2) Where since there is only one father, all are equal sisters and brothers
      - (3) And where the reality of that kingdom
        - (a) is not subjects cowering in fear;
        - (b) but family sharing around a table.
          - (i) Knowing that whenever they do these things;
            1. Jesus is present with them;
            2. And so is the kingdom.
- 9) This idea of the kingdom of God as a table and a meal is beautiful of course;
  - a) Except for one thing;
    - i) If it is difficult to get families to go to church together;
      - (1) it is even more difficult to get them to sit down and eat together.
    - ii) More and more Americans report that they eat dinner at home, in front of their computers or TV's alone.

- iii) This isolation is even greater in places like New York,
  - iv) where despite the fact that we live among millions of people,
  - v) most of us spend our lives . . . alone.
  - b) And yet maybe, just maybe, that is precisely the reason why after the fear of punishment has faded and the guilt is gone.
- 10) so many of us still come to places like these;
- i) And that is because we glimpse something here
    - (1) Often we are not sure what it is;
      - (a) We might call it faith or spirituality
      - (b) Or just that good feeling we get when we come here
    - ii) But one thing is for sure; we don't see it out there; and that is why we keep coming back.
      - (1) We get on the subway and we are studiously ignored.
        - (a) We enter here and are welcomed.
      - (2) We sit on the bus, and no one cares;
        - (a) People jabber on the cell phone
        - (b) Scream at their kids
        - (c) Eat their smelly lunch
      - (3) We sit here and are invited to share in what we all do;
        - (a) We sing together, pray together listen eat and drink together.
      - (4) We work in our offices; eat our meals alone sit in front of our computers yearning for some kind of community on line;
      - (5) And here, although we so often miss it because we hardly recognize it, we find real community, where we can talk and think and work and serve and do it together.
    - iii) And in that community, gathered around this table we see what those people heard in John and saw in Jesus; the kingdom which is a family.
- 11) I am not sure that our seeing that does a whole lot for our kids;
- a) Nor for our neighbors,
    - i) still snug in their beds from a late night of partying,
    - ii) or eating brunch at the local café.
  - b) But one thing I am sure of;
    - i) The degree to which we work to help other people see what we see;
    - ii) We make this place a place where the invitation of John and the welcome of Jesus are heard more consistently
    - iii) and make this community a family gathered around the Lord's table
    - iv) Is the degree to which in this church, the kingdom of heaven draws near
    - v) And we make this church the way it is supposed to be.
      - (1) And then who knows? Maybe what drew people to John;
      - (2) What drew people to Jesus
      - (3) Will draw our children and friends and neighbors too.