

Pastor's Pen: The Greatest Lesson of the Home

A few weeks back, we brought Fr. Jerrod Lies (pronounced 'lease') in and he did a wonderful night of recollection on stewardship. I know we hear that word, stewardship, and think we are talking about money. As Bishop McKnight recently said, "*Stewardship is not a backhanded way to do fund-raising.*" Fr. Lies did not bring up money once. He talked about how stewardship is the building up of relationships within our homes, parishes, and communities. Last weekend, Bishop McKnight met with 200+ delegates from across the diocese (including four apiece from each of our parishes) to launch a new pastoral plan process. The endgame is to provide a more unified relationship built on the love of God and each other.

In previous pastor's pens, I talked about the four pillars of stewardship: prayer, hospitality, service, and formation. I have talked about how each of these begins within the structure of the family and moves to the larger communities in which these families live. Today, I wish to use an image that Fr. Lies used in his talk to drive home this point: a chocolate fountain.

I think most of us have seen one of these types of fountains at a wedding reception or at Golden Corral. The melted chocolate cascades from the top and flows in to 2 or 3 larger basins and a motor pumps it back to the top to cascade down again. People will dip fruits in to it. Fr. Lies used this image to describe how our love of God flows into our spousal love which flows into the love we have for our children which flows into the larger communities into which the family belongs. If we get this love right and in the right order, then stewardship is as natural as breathing.

Love of God

Love of God is core to our ability to successfully love everyone else. Love is a theological virtue which means that it is a habit built choice by choice. It is a habit that needs God's grace to grow in depth and resolve. The stronger our love of God is, the stronger our other relationships will be.

What does it mean to love God, though? Many times, we equate loving God with following a bunch of rules. Loving God is more than following rules just like loving your parents is more than following their rules. You follow your parents' rules because you have a relationship with them and love them, not so that in following their rules you might come to love them and have a relationship with them. When we say we love God it means we recognize His love for us and dominion over us. To love God means we make time and energy to develop our relationship with Him. Furthermore, we allow who He is to make who we are more like Him.

Practically speaking, this means we seek to please Him and not hurt Him as we would in any loving relationship. Since the Scriptures make clear that love of God and love of neighbor are intimately intertwined, we change for the better the better we treat those around us. We love others not merely because there are rules saying we should, but because it is the right thing to do.

To love God means to want to sacrifice and suffer for Him as He does for us. This love pours into every other relationship like the chocolate in a chocolate fountain flows from the top bowl to lower bowls; it is the same chocolate from top to bottom, likewise the love of God flows into the other relationships we have.

Love of Spouse

Within marriage and family life, that next level of love is expressed first with one's spouse. Theologians and psychologists alike will tell us that within marriage the primary relationship is between the spouses...not parent to child. Admittedly, the raising of children takes up great amounts of time and energy (not to mention expense), but the relationship between the parents is far more important. Why?

First, the love between spouses is a sacrament called Matrimony. It is an earthly example of the eternal union that exists between us and God, between Christ and His bride, the Church. From that life comes new life in the form of children. Together with the love of God which cements their relationship, the spouses train their children to love as well. That spousal love teaches the children how to love God with fidelity, compassion, and mercy. A dad teaches his children how to love God by the way he loves God; he teaches his children how to love their mother by how he loves their mother. A mother teaches her children to love God by the way she loves God; she teaches her children how to love their father by how she loves their father. This mutual love provides the stability and the fertile ground in which well-balanced followers of Christ come.

Love of Family

Having built a foundation of love between God and spouses and spouses with each other, they teach their children the same self-giving love. The parents model that love and encourage their children to that same love. In the home, children are first taught how to forgive, how to share, how to be selfless, how to rise above fear, how to be compassionate, and how to be charitable. The first vision the children get of this is the relationship between the parents.

The family unit learns the art of mutual self-giving, of selfless service, and of how to properly get along with others in society. The ability to learn this will spill into every other aspect of life. Like the chocolate fountain that spills from level to level, so the love of God spills into the love of spouse which spills into love of family which spills into love of neighbor.

Love of Neighbor

Here is where the lessons of the home powerfully play out in every other institution that the family touches. Within the parish, if love of God rules the home, it will rule the parish as well. The same understanding of being a proper steward of the family (taking care of the household so as to thrive) will spill out into the parish and proper stewardship will allow the parish to thrive. This same sense of stewardship will spill out into our communities, our body politic, and society as a whole. Families anchored in the love of God and love of each other will spill out and transform society.