

Dear friends in Christ



“You’ve Gotta Work the Program”

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Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133;
1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

I remember when I had come to my first parish out in the desert, a little town called Inyokern. It was so small I remember driving through the main section of town and across the railroad tracks. My wife with a quaver in her voice and tears in her eyes asked, “Is this all there is?”

Centrally located. Two hundred fifty miles from anywhere!

There didn’t seem much for young people out there. When I asked some of the youth what there was to do, one girl said, “You go to desert parties, get drunk, get pregnant, and then get married.” “Wonderful,” I thought. I was sure glad we didn’t have any children at the time.

Within a month I had the first young couple show up on my doorstep to be married. Judging from the condition of the young lady, it seemed likely that she had attended one of those notorious desert parties. I followed the schedule of pre-marital counseling classes that I had learned in seminary.

I stressed that what we were doing would require work on their part. “You gotta work the program.” That is what the community of faith is for – to provide support and encouragement, help and wise counsel. But you gotta work the program.

One of the questions I usually asked to set the couple at ease concerned what originally had attracted them to each other. The young, the far too young, young lady got all moony eyed and sighed, "His car." I knew then we were in trouble. I could see that the "program" was in deep doo-doo.

Well, we went through the counseling sessions, and I figured that maybe they had a 50-50 chance of making it. Of course, had I declined to marry them, I'm sure they would have found someone who would have had less compunction about it. I also rationalized that if they were able to work things out, the child would certainly be better off in a stable home.

At the conclusion of our sessions together I admonished the young couple to come back to me if there were any problems that I could help them work out. Especially before they became insurmountable. Be part of a community of faith that would nurture and support them.

After the wedding, the couple never returned; and later, I heard that they had split up. No surprise. He was too busy with his car and friends and partying. He couldn't understand why he should change. She became too angry and shrill at being ignored and taken for granted. He withdrew into a shell. The wall of anger between the two of them became an insurmountable barrier.

The Church is Spirit-powered to help couples work the program. But it's not magic.

I'm not sure what they were expecting when they came to the church. A marriage, especially when folks are this young, needs an awful lot of support. It needs the daily spiritual discipline of forgiveness, sacrifice and active concern for the other. These are bedrock requirements if there is to be joy and peace at home. They seemed to have believed that having the church, or God, present through my officiating would magically make everything okay and happiness would rule ever after.

Unfortunately, the Hollywood fantasy did not come through for this ill-fated couple. It hardly ever does.

It would seem that none of what we had gone through for several weeks stuck. Indeed, to make it work, you've gotta work the program.

That's also the core truth about recovery as well. And that's the core truth about faith.

"Peace be with you" were the first words they heard. Frightened and guilty, huddled together in the darkness, the last person they ever thought they would

lay eyes on was Jesus. “Peace be with you.” But this is a Jesus not bound anymore by time or place.

“Peace be with you. He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Here’s the power to work the program. You’ve got the power.

Proclaim Good News – BE the Good News. You have the Power. But you’ve gotta work the program. Put that power to good purpose.

Christians, we’ve gotta work the program – every bit as much as that couple of young people needed to.

When I came to one church, an older couple greeted our family – we were a three-generation family at that point. This middle-aged couple – a white man and a Vietnamese wife. I found out Kim had been a war bride.

I soon found a lot other things about Kim. That first Sunday after church, she didn’t ask. She told. Told me to set aside Tuesday because I was going to be with her behind the community hall serving lunch for the homeless. And I did. Kim and her husband definitely worked the program. She had seem so much privation and hunger in Vietnam, she was determined that no one should be going hungry in her new home, America, if she could help it.

And America would likewise be good to Kim. Several years ago their daughter graduated with a PhD in psychology.

It was one of the great things about that congregation -- Kim and her outreach to the homeless. This was the program, and with Christ by her side, she was going to make sure we got with the program. And worked it.

At one point she asked if we could invite these folks to our evening service, which we called Alternative Service. Of course, why not? Our music for that service was provided by a small group, piano, drums, string bass, fiddle, trumpet and a saxophone. When the group did “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” it was pure Dixieland. We did folk, gospel and Taizé music. We’d take a standard hymn and set it to a beat.

As we always began with a dinner at 6:00 o’clock, of course the homeless had a reason to be there. Beside Kim’s prodding. As we had a shower, they could also clean up. And Kim would make sure folks did.

One day a fellow named Freddy asked if he could bring his mouth harp. Of course. The following week, I couldn’t believe the music I was hearing. Freddy could have played that blues harmonica as a sideman in any recording studio.

I told him that from now on, he would be the prelude. “What’s that?” he asked. “That’s the music that gets us all started after dinner.” That evening service was the program, Spirit propelled with JOY. Easter Joy! And more and more homeless and others showed up each week. They worked the program.

Somewhere Teilhard de Chardin said that Joy is the most profound evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Working the program with unadulterated JOY. Working the program with Easter Joy is never a drudge.

As one of my church secretaries, Kay, once told a boy who thought her parity was boring, that he could go call his mother right now to pick him up. “We certainly wouldn’t want anyone here who’s being bored.” His response? “Oh... Ah...Er... Ah, I was talking about another party.” (Gulp.)

Get with the program. Work it. The Spirit doesn’t like boredom any better than did our church secretary Kay.

“Peace be with you.” This was not any ordinary turn of phrase to pass the day. Not a perfunctory “Good morning, how are you?”

This was a profound expression of reconciliation. It was an act of complete and utter forgiveness. They had all fled in terror. They were faithless friends. Peter had denied him three times. The Risen Lord had every reason to abandon them to their fate, whatever that might be – to have washed his hands of them.

Love doesn’t give up. Even the Risen Christ continues to work God’s program. He knew that his followers were better than their worst moments. As are we – and with Spirit-assist, we often improve with age.

Anyone who has been married ten, fifteen, twenty or more years knows the need for forgiveness. The same for long-term friendships.

The only way you make it through the years is to make an awful lot of allowances for each other. You need a lot of forgiveness. Marriage is sacramental, in that the selfless giving that takes place in such a relationship is exactly the power that Christ brought to those disciples huddled in that upper room of fear –the power of life made visible. One pastor said that marriage is our one opportunity to grow up.

A long-term friendship is sacramental in the same way. It is also an outward and visible sign of Christ’s continuing forgiveness and reconciliation. It is godly companionship. And as such, it is also an outward and visible sign of the joy of Christ’s presence – the blessing of Absolute Joy.

How often I am saddened by couples who so yearned for the magic of having their new, story-book beginning blessed by the Christian community, but who couldn't quite bring themselves to be a part of Christ's ongoing community of reconciliation, of sustenance – a community where they might just possibly have found the same reconciling Spirit-power when their marriage began to become precarious.

It's not magic. Spirit-tools are available, but YOU, you've gotta work the program.

There's the story a rabbi told of a father and his wastrel son. He comes to temple every Sabbath and pours out his anguish before God about this kid whose life is going nowhere.

The story's of the old Jewish man in New York City who enters the synagogue one morning, and in the silence of the moment pours out his heart to the Almighty. "O God who made heaven and earth, you know that I have never asked for anything for myself. Never! But I'm asking you now, for my son. He's never done well and I'm not sure what will happen to him when I'm gone. All I'm asking you now is to just let him win the lottery. Not a huge amount, just enough to get by when I'm no longer here to watch over him." In the deep shadows of the place no answer is heard. Dejected, the man leaves.

The next week he enters the synagogue and again fervently prays the same prayer. Silence. No answer.

But this fellow is one to persevere. And so, a week later he enters and in the dim recesses of the synagogue, again he pours out his heart before God on behalf of his son. "Just this once, O Lord. It's the only thing I ask." As he turns to leave, a brilliant shaft of light floods through a window, right on the spot on which he is standing, with a resounding voice, "Could you help me out here and have him buy a ticket?"

The price of the ticket? Listen to the Spirit. She's nearer than you'd ever think – right there in your own imagining. With Power. With Joy. With Challenge. With your Holy Assignment. The task given for our time. Your PROGRAM.

And sometimes when the presence is so profound, like Thomas, we can only stammer, "My Lord and my God." Amen.