

Conference I: Living in the Tension of Life

For there is a story out there; something larger going on all around us. In order to understand the story you have to enter into it. You have a part to play; a purpose to pursue; a calling to live; a sacrifice to give; a legacy to leave behind (Elderedge, *Epic*, p. 2).

The call of maturing discipleship, the call of our identity as beloved of God by grace, the call of the Gospel, and the call of our baptism is all directed outward. We are built, and called, to engage the world, to compete, to challenge, to test the mettle of our gifts and virtues, to leave our mark, to build up the kingdom of God, and to confront the wider world. This is the plan of God for us as disciples of Christ!

But, too often, these same impulses are dulled. We can live scattered lives on the surface, distracted by endless responsibilities, and remain foreign even to ourselves. Our lives become flat and we are lulled inward into a world no bigger than ourselves because we lack a personal vision given by God (Hosea 4:6). We can unknowingly permit our greater call to share in the radiant glory of God to be robbed from us!

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book IV, chapter 9: "The question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what God intended us to be when He made us. [At some level] we may be content to remain [as we are] what we call 'ordinary people': but God is determined to carry out quite a different plan." (additions mine).

The alternative is clear: either a disciple of Christ governs his/her passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them. He remains in bondage, tethered to a shadow of himself, and abandons his deep, satisfying desires. Settling for cheap substitutes. Graveling secretly in the shadows of unfulfilled desires. What an unhappy life! What an impoverished legacy!

Instead of fighting, sacrificing, testing our mettle, and growing in wholeness promised by Christ (John 10:10), we look for cheap substitutes for real living. We are present, but can lack purpose. We show up but, not fully engaged. Encountering God and

2018 Lenten Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton & Saint Andrew Catholic Church, Milford, Ohio

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encountering ourselves remains distant; our call and our mission do not define our daily lives. And, as a result, we relegate our vocation as Christian disciples to, perhaps, another time, or to someone else.

C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in Screwtape Proposes a Toast: "Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink, and sex, and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, . . . [w]e are far too easily pleased."

And, yet, through baptism, we enter courageously and definitively to a share in the priestly, kingly, and prophetic mission of Christ. It is a robust calling to offer spiritual sacrifices, and exercise, in wisdom, power, and discernment, the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to each one of us at baptism. We are to be disciples of influence, of action, of vision, of virtue, and of deep, passionate, intimate personal life of prayer that pierces the heart and draws others to eternal life!

But, to enter such an adventure we must reveal ourselves to others, and lay before God the Father, from whom all authority in heaven and on earth come, the inner realm and deep terrain of our hearts. We must reveal ourselves authentically, generously. And, we must make room for God to reveal us to ourselves.

And, this is the terrain where our life struggle begins.

Hebrews 12: 1b-2: "Let us lay aside every encumbrance of sin which clings to us and persevere in running the race which lies ahead; let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame."

Then what is the fundamental problem? What is wrong with us?

2018 Lenten Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton & Saint Andrew Catholic Church, Milford, Ohio

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Fundamentally, we fear being loved too much by God. We fear losing ourselves in His love. We fear loving God too much. Why? Because we fear what He may ask of us. We fear what He may ask from us!

We fear losing our carefully constructed identity, our predictable habits of managing our lives, our control, the masks by which we desire to be known, our familiar sins and inordinate pleasures that are only a mirage for real living. We fear to trust.

We ask ourselves – sometimes aloud or in careful whisper: Will God provide? Does He truly desire my happiness? Does He love me? In my brokenness? When I am far from Him? If He takes this or that away from me then who am I? What will I have left? All that is familiar is gone!

The lack of trust, that God will provide, produces fear and anxiety. We often then rely, by default, on our own strengths, not relating our needs to God. We keep Him at a safe relational distance. When exhausted by all our efforts and facing our limitations, we doubt, and *grasp* to fill ourselves, often falling into sin or diversions that leave us dissatisfied, numbed, troubled, and on the frantic surface of life. It is a damaging cycle the requires deep healing!

So, we live a domesticated Christian discipleship; careful, safe, and emotionally isolated from others, from God, and, ironically, from ourselves. We strive. We complain. We strive harder. We self-justify our raw actions and inner dispositions of our restless heart. We can live this way only so long until we rush to BREAK OUT. No person wants to be governed, chained, and caged in such a flat existence! (cf. Hosea 4:6)

Christian discipleship is designed by God's mercy to break out of our numbed inertia in which our nature can tend and make room for God. We are redeemed but not fully, and the "not fully" deflates our dreams and domesticates our heart's deep desires in which sin *falsely* poises itself as the only solution for one to feel alive again.

Yet, discipleship in Christ is an encounter with our own weakness; a discovery of our potential for greatness in Christ! Discipleship takes us back to what really matters in life. We return to the beginning . . . to encounter our dependency with the One who loved us into existence and redeems us into new life. With the One

2018 Lenten Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton & Saint Andrew Catholic Church, Milford, Ohio

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who has given our life purpose and meaning, who imparts our true, personal identity and a mission to live.

Saint Therese: "If only everyone weak and imperfect like me felt as I do, no one would despair of reaching the heights of love, for Jesus does not ask for glorious deeds. He asks only for self-surrender and for gratitude."

Discipleship is simple. It is a courageous stripping of ourselves to listen to the One who constantly speaks to our hidden self, our wounded, estranged heart . . . it is He who constantly calls us *in* our darkness to come *out* of our darkness. As intentional disciples we leave behind our distractions, our delusions, our worn-out, tired identities. *"We head to Calvary and into the darkness of Christ's tomb. There we encounter the weight of grace, our resurrection in Christ. In the darkness, in the tomb, lies the light of hope!"* (Cf. Father Peter John Cameron, O.P., Editorial, Magnificat Lenten Companion) (additions mine).

Jacques Philippe, *Interior Freedom*, pp. 37-38: "When we see ourselves with God's eyes, we experience tremendous freedom. It could be called a double freedom: to be sinners, and to become saints.

The freedom to be sinners doesn't mean we are free to sin without worrying about the consequences – that would not be freedom but irresponsibility. *It means we are not crushed by the fact of being sinners* – we have a sort of "right" to be poor, the right to be what we are. God knows our weaknesses and infirmities, but he is not scandalized by them and doesn't condemn us. *'As tenderly as a father treats his children, so Yahweh treats those who fear him; he knows what we are made of, he remembers that we are dust'* (Psalm 103:14).

God is of course inviting us to holiness, spurring us to conversion and progress. But His gaze never makes us feel anguished at the thought of not managing. We don't feel the "pressure" that sometimes comes from other people or the way we judge ourselves, telling us we can never be good enough, making us permanently dissatisfied with ourselves and always guilty for existing, as many people may unconsciously do. God's look gives us full rights to be ourselves, with our limitations and deficiencies. It gives us

2018 Lenten Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton & Saint Andrew Catholic Church, Milford, Ohio

Rev. John A. Klockeman, Saint Paul Seminary, Saint Paul, MN

the “right to make mistakes,” and delivers us, so to speak, from the imprisoning sense that we ought to be something other than we are. That feeling does not originate in God’s will but in our damaged psyches (our wounded self).” (*emphases mine*)

So, there is a redemptive cleansing and freedom in abandoning ourselves to Christ; in permitting ourselves to be loved by Him, to soak in His love, and respond in imitation.

There is a redemptive cleansing and freedom in letting go of the exhaustive task of grasping to fill ourselves (sin) and managing our attachments, wounds, limitations, and fears because we fear losing a fleeting sense of happiness or judgment of what others, let alone God, may think of us.

We mustn’t resist the love of the Father, won by the Son, caught up in the Spirit. We *must* be stretched . . . that our greatest desire to be loved by the Father – *to be noticed, known, seen and received* – this also is our greatest fear. Will He provide? Am I good enough? Does He desire *my* happiness?

C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*:
“Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about . . . when infinite joy is offered to us, . . . [we] are far too easily pleased.”

At some point we have to step into the full reality that God loves us more than we want to be loved, and that requires us to step into the pain of suffering unto our own salvation . . . because the love of God has a face. All of us, at some time to be made whole, must let go of the chaff, the false gods we seek to fulfill us, the passing pleasures, the wounds that rule us, the emotional toll of constantly controlling, the all too familiar sins that misshape us, and a superficial life that robs us.

2018 Lenten Mission

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton & Saint Andrew Catholic Church, Milford, Ohio

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C.S. Lewis, "The Four Loves": "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable."

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it produces a rich harvest."

What, then, is the will of the Father? *The will of God is a call to honest love.* What the ancient Christians called the *pure of heart* who as cleansed vessels see God and abide in union with Him. While it is perfected and fulfilled in heaven, I would propose that we can taste this union now. So love. Love profoundly, boldly, generously. But, be careful what you love. Gift yourself to God. And, know with clarity the deepest and true desires of your heart, for it is there that the Father will mature you to love authentically, courageously, and with abandon as witnessed in the great saints. There, is where *true human freedom* and divine glory, meet.

1 Peter 5:6-11: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time He may exalt you. Cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you. Be sober, be watchful. [Your adversary the devil prowls like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world]. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, establish, and strengthen you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." (emphasis mine)

Yet, we fear being loved too much by God. We fear losing ourselves in His love. We even fear loving God too much. But, there is a hope that provides.

2018 Lenten Mission

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Sirach 17:20: "To the penitent God provides a way back, he encourages those who are losing hope and has chosen for them the lot of truth." God simultaneously reveals Himself, and the full potential of the man and woman, the saint He means of make of us.

Watchman Nee (China, 1903-1972), p. 38: "God must bring us to a point – I cannot tell you how it will be, but He will do it – where, through a deep and dark experience, our natural power is touched and fundamentally weakened, so that we no longer dare trust ourselves. He has had to deal with some of us very strangely, and take us through difficult and painful ways, in order to get us there . . . But, then, at last, it is that He can begin to use us . . .

We would like to have death and resurrection put together within one hour of each other. We cannot face the thought that God will keep us aside for so long a time; we cannot bear to wait. And, of course, I cannot tell you how long He will take, but in principle I think it is quite safe to say this, that there will be a definite period when He will keep you there.

All is in darkness, but it is only for a night: It must indeed be a full night; but that is all. Afterwards you will find that everything is given back to you in glorious resurrection; and nothing can measure the difference between what was before and what now is!"

Yet, when we reside in His love, hope expands, and our faith radiates.

The Cloud of Unknowing: "He has no fear or error in believing that God is calling him [to contemplation], regardless of what sort of person he is now or has been in the past. It is not what you are nor what you have been that God sees with His all-merciful eyes, but what you [deeply] desire [in the core of your being] to be."
(additions mine)

Saint Vincent de Paul: "If we are really called to carry the love of God far and wide, if we are to enflame the nations with this fire, if we have the vocation of setting the whole world on fire, if it is so, I say, if it is so, my brothers, then how much I must myself burn with the divine fire!"

2018 Lenten Mission

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“God wounds only to heal; He destroys in order to rebuild.” (30 Day “abandonment”)

Saint Augustine: “For a just man to be made from a sinner, is greater than to create heaven and earth.” *On John*, tract. LXXII, super XIV.

Saint Thomas Aquinas: “The good of grace in one is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe.” ST I-II, q. 113, a. 9.

The Son craves to give glory to the Father and to receive the glory which is His.

“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you.” This is the mission of Christ, to unveil life with the Father, to which each man and woman is invited.

Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

Jeremiah 17:7-8: “Blessed is the man who *trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord*. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that *stretches* out its roots to the stream: It fears not the heat when it comes, its leaves stay green; in the year of drought it shows not distress, but still bears fruit.”

Yet when we reside in the fire His love, hope expands, and our faith radiates.

Saint Katherine Drexel: “I look up in wonder at God’s wonderful ways and thought how little we imagine what may be the result of listening and acting on a

2018 Lenten Mission

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desire God puts into the heart, . . . [y]es, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is with you . . . nourish before Him great desires.”

Let your every day reflect the magnitude, the power, and the grace of the greatest single act of your life – the day of your redemption! We must no longer hide from ourselves, and even from God – no longer relating to God in fear as adolescents, but as adult disciples standing firm in love with the Living God! Let Christ be Lord and Savior! Let Him plant His cross in our all too many weaknesses and false consolations! For we are called, in all our potential, to greatness in His grace. Living free in our fundamental identity, and identity before all else, as beloved sons and daughters of the Father by grace. So,

Hebrews 12: 1b-2: “Let us lay aside every encumbrance of sin which clings to us and persevere in running the race which lies ahead; let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who inspires and perfects our faith. For the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame.”

So, what are the obstacles that rob us from such heights of glory, true freedom and happiness? And, what are the proven approaches to wholeness in Christ? Come on Tuesday and Wednesday and then find out!