

Faith, Excellence, Service: Catholic School Week 2021

Homily for Thursday of the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time 2020
Hebrews 12:18-19; Psalm 48, Mark 6:7-13

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Peace be with you! Faith. Excellence. Service. Those are the key words that mark this year's Catholic School Week across the 6,183 Catholic grade schools and high schools across the United States. Faith. Excellence. Service.

What does this faith look like? We need not go farther than today's Gospel from St. Mark. To see faith, let me start with my sandal. In the Gospel, when Jesus sends out his twelve apostles, he tells them "...to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick – no food, no sack, no money in their belts. They were however to wear sandals but not a second tunic. Hence, I show you my sandal.

This sandal is a picture of faith. Permit me to explain. In the ancient world travel was hard and arduous. Indeed, no traveler in his right mind would follow the TSA travel instructions of Jesus to travel only with sandals and walking stick.

Besides a walking stick and a sturdy set of sandals, travelers would take a little food for the journey. They might have a sack with parcels. They might even hide a coin or two somewhere in their belts for emergencies.

The purpose of travel? We hear the purpose referenced in our responsorial psalm. To go to Mt. Zion. To ponder God's mercy in the temple. The typical traveler did not travel for business nor for pleasure. The typical traveler took to the road for the purpose of religious pilgrimage.

But when religious pilgrims reached their destination at the temple of Jerusalem, they followed a strict protocol. They removed their outer tunic called a himation. They took off their belts. They left any parcels at the entrance. They even set aside their traveling sticks and their sandals since they had reached their destination: worship in the temple.

The message could not be clearer. Jesus sends the twelve out with nothing for the road because he wants them to enter the homes of those whose lives they touch as if they were entering into the holy temple of Jerusalem. He wants them to go on the road as if the road itself were the temple. He wants them to travel as if the pilgrimage itself were a place of temple worship. He



wants them to reverence the homes of those they enter as if they were entering the holy temple precincts of Jerusalem.

Faith. Excellence. Service. Jesus wants the faith of the twelve to be of such excellence that they leave all aside in order to place themselves at the service of the Gospel. Faith. Excellence. Service. This is precisely what we strive to live as Catholic schools across Central Washington here in the Diocese of Yakima.

And I know it is hard. As bishop, I am keenly aware that we all want normal. When can we stop wearing masks? When can we resume social activities? When can we have fiestas? When can we have dinners and dances? When can we have fundraisers and social gatherings? When can we just hang out with our friends? When can we hug and shake hands and stand close?

COVID-19 has stripped away so much of what makes life rich and meaningful. Yet perhaps COVID-19 also sends us into the world in the same way Jesus sends his twelve into the world. With only a walking stick and sandals. Maybe COVID-19 is calling forth a deeper level of faith from us. Maybe COVID-19 is calling for a richer human excellence from us. Maybe COVID-19 is allowing us to focus less on ourselves and our losses and more on how we can be of service to those in need around us. Faith. Excellence. Service.

I want to thank you, the students, for the many ways you are stepping up to the challenge of school with distant learning platforms as well as in-person but socially distant classroom instruction. I want to thank the many parents who have had to support new technologies and new ways of being a Catholic school in the home. I want to thank the principals, the teaching faculty and the support staff of all of our schools for the great sacrifices they make in order to provide Catholic education in a COVID-19 environment. I want to thank our school pastors as well as our diocesan support staff for undergirding our efforts in getting our schools open and operating mindful of the dangers of COVID-19 infections. I want to thank our school commissions as well as our many benefactors who support our Catholic education ministry. Faith. Excellence. Service. These words describe all of you.

Like the twelve in this Gospel from St. Mark, Jesus sends us out to preach the good news. He sends us on a pilgrimage. In a world filled with polarization, divisions, harsh language and controversy, Jesus sends us into the lives of those around us. He asks us to drop our ideological baggage. He asks that we set aside all that encumbers us emotionally. He asks that we enter the lives of others as if we were entering the sacred space of the temple in Jerusalem. May we live up to our high call as Catholic schools. May we embody what we hear today in the Gospel: Faith, Excellence and Service. Peace be with you!