



Rev. Jack Conley

Solemn Novena 07-20-26

As you know, our theme for this novena has been “Reading the Signs of the Times.” And when the Pharisees demanded a sign from Jesus, he said, “You know, when a west wind blows, you say it’s going to rain, and so it does. And when a south wind blows, you say it’s going to be hot, and so it is. You can read the portals of earth and sky. Why can’t you read the signs of the times?”

And so Father Rick and I have been trying to focus on what Father Rick calls the art of living. Jesus seemed at times to be obsessed with the kingdom of God—the art of living according to God’s plan. And as we were reminded yesterday, the early Christians were called the Way. It was the kingdom of God. It was the art of living on God’s terms.

But yesterday we also heard from Rick about what happens when we get dislodged, or we get off the path, or the Way. It’s those moments when we succumb to distractions, to disillusionment, to all kinds of addictions.

And so I’d like to continue that conversation this afternoon, and I’m going to do it under the umbrella of character. There are a lot of authors and journalists, writers, even historians, who have been writing recently about the importance of character—people like Heather Cox Richardson, who teaches history at Harvard, or Stephen Carter, Robert Reich. So a lot of them are telling us that, to be wholesome and holy, character is important.

A few years ago, the very famous tennis celebrity and master Andre Agassi wrote his autobiography, entitled Open. And on the very first page, Agassi pens these words: “I play

tennis for a living, even though I hate tennis. I hate it with a dark and secret passion, and I always have.”

Now, Agassi’s reasons and narratives make for a wonderful read, but they got me thinking. I wonder how many of us really embrace our identity with peace and joy, whether it’s our career, our job, our ministry, our vocation, our Catholic identity. Do we celebrate it with excitement and joy?

If religion is to truly help us navigate the difficult moments of time and the turbulent times, what are we missing?

So this afternoon I’m going to focus on one of the virtues of a person of noble character, and I call it fidelity. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They get very ethereal you know, pie in the sky. And he says, “No, no, no, no, no, no. You who do you say that I am? Talk to me. Do I make any difference in your life?”

You see, most of us today, I believe, are getting frustrated with the easy solutions, the pat answers—you know, those self-help books like Six Steps to Lose Forty Pounds in Two Weeks Without Diet or Exercise, Seven Habits of Highly Successful People, and there’s a whole list of these.

Because Jesus, in his own preaching, reminds us of an alternative to easy solutions. It’s what we call paradox: seeming contradictions or opposites that we’re immersed in in everyday life.

When people come to me for spiritual direction, I like to give them a map for growing in holiness. It’s an acronym: M-A-P mystery, ambiguity, and paradox. That’s usually the way God works.

We conquer by yielding, Jesus said. For Saint Paul reminds us that it is in our weakness that we find strength. We rule, or reign, by serving. We are exalted when we’re humbled. We become wise when we’re fools for Christ, and we preach Christ crucified. We find victory when we acknowledge our limitations and God’s unconditional love.

I think often of the classical violinist Itzhak Perlman. Whether he’s in concert or playing in a symphony, Perlman is always seated as a violinist. Heavy steel braces encase both of his legs.

And in a recent interview, Mr. Perlman spoke of two events that occurred in his life that literally changed the direction of his existence, and both of them occurred when he was only four years old. Mr. Perlman said, “Number one, I contracted polio. And number two, as a little boy, I was privileged to experience my idol, Jascha Heifetz, play the violin. The first took away my legs, but the second gave me wings.”

You know, those experiences in life that seem tragic and painful suddenly open a new door of hope for us sometimes. So often when we gather together for prayer, we’re keenly aware of those events that cripple us with fear or anger, that paralyze us with disappointment and

frustration. But the Scriptures keep directing us to those moments, to those profound human experiences that enable us to soar.

And Psalm 91—we sing it a lot “You raise me up, Lord, as if on eagle’s wings.” And so this afternoon, under the theme of fidelity, I think we’re enabled to soar.

Holiness is not a head trip, as Father Rick says. It depends on making decisions to be faithful to be kind and merciful. Hope is a choice. When God tells ancient Israel, “I place before you life and death; choose life.”

So, you see, there’s a distinction between fidelity and perseverance. Perseverance is a very good virtue. It’s discipline. And when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Or as Nike tells us, “Just do it.” It’s grim stoicism. It’s grit your teeth and bite the bullet and get on with it. And it’s a good virtue, perseverance, but fidelity is beyond that. It’s deeper than that.

Fidelity is comprised by two facets I call intimacy and integrity.

Intimacy—I don’t mean a sexual expression or a physical expression. Rather, it’s to yield to another person some claim over my life. When I allow another person in so close, I empower them to change me. It assumes a kind of transparency or self-revelation, a kind of vulnerability. And page after page in the Gospels, Jesus models for us what intimacy really is.

The Gospel I shared just now from Matthew 15: the woman is a Syrophoenician. That means she’s not Jewish. She’s a Gentile from the northwestern district, Tyre and Sidon. But she’s a mom, and her daughter is very ill. And she gets a rumor that this rabbi from Nazareth has the power to heal.

She approaches Jesus and asks for help, and he ignores her—not because he’s rude or unkind, but because he’s a good Jew. And the rule was that a rabbi could never speak with a woman publicly if she was not accompanied by a male. And so Jesus abides by the rules.

But she’s determined. She’s desperate as a mother. And she says, “Please, sir, help me.” And Jesus says, “I minister only to Jewish people. You’re not Jewish. Please, it’s not right to take the food of sons and daughters and throw it to the dogs.”

Now, that sounds pretty discourteous, if you ask me. Rude. But she comes back further, saying, “You know, even the dogs get scraps that fall from the master’s table.”

He’ll conclude this conversation saying, “I don’t see this kind of faith in my own people, we Jewish people. Go on home; your daughter’s healed.”

What we see again and again is how Jesus is changed by others around him. He allows them in so close, he empowers them to transform himself. He begins his ministry saying, “I minister only to Jews,” and he’ll conclude in Matthew saying, “Go out to all the world and baptize all people.”

And finally, I look at the virtue not only of intimacy but of integrity. And I'm going to spend a whole conference on this later this week.

But integrity is when I yield to another person some claim over my life, and then I'm willing to go deeper. I'm willing to listen to those currents deep within that give me direction ... the underlying motivation—my dream. [The connecting words in this phrase are indistinct.]

Remember when you were a high-school kid? What was your dream? And have you been faithful to that dream?

I love the story. There are so many images, or what we call parables, that Jesus uses to describe this kingdom of heaven. And one of them is ten women—five wise and five foolish. Their task was to light the path for the wedding party. They had these small clay vessels, or lanterns, with a bit of olive oil and a wick so they could light the path.

Now, the foolish ones failed to bring extra oil along. You can see these little lanterns in museums even today. The wise ones know that people are often late, and so they brought an extra vessel of oil.

So the party is late. They begin to fall asleep. And then at midnight somebody says, "They're here. Get ready." And so they all begin to trim their lamps. But the foolish ones turn to the wise and say, "Our lamps are going out. Give us some of your oil."

Then they respond, "Well, if we hand you our oil—we don't have any lights. So you better go to the village and buy some for yourselves." They do, and while they're gone, the party arrives and the door is barred.

And then from the village they arrive saying, "Master, open the door!" And he responds, "I don't know who you are."

I must admit, I never liked that Bible story. I always thought, "Those selfish little biddies—why didn't they share their oil?"

Joachim Jeremias is kind of a guru as a Scripture scholar interpreting parables, and he says they only have one point, or one lesson. This is not a lesson about generosity. It's a lesson about the profundity of human experience.

And there are some things that you cannot share. You've got to get your own. You can't live life vicariously. You can't glean wisdom solely from the Internet or from AI. You've got to fall in love and know betrayal. You've got to know suffering and hope. The precious oil of human experience is something you bring to church this afternoon. You've suffered, and you've gleaned wisdom.

Finally, there's an author that I like. His name is Elia Kazan. He was a very successful movie producer in Hollywood, and then at the end of his life he turned to writing. And one of his novels is called *The Arrangement*. I've read it four or five times. It's good writing.

It's about another college kid who wants to be a writer. And he's very, very talented. He's gifted, articulate, and in touch with his emotions. But because of his friends and his parents and his girlfriend, he's channeled into the world of marketing and advertising.

And then the world of advertising almost succeeds in choking his dream to death. He marries a woman who nurtures this betrayal of his dream, and after ten years of marriage and a couple of kids, he's terribly unhappy. His wife is unhappy. His kids are unhappy. He's physically intimate with some women, but really intimate with whom? No one.

He's poured all of his energy into the world of marketing. I don't mean to be vulgar, but one evening he's at a party and he gets inebriated. It's pouring rain and he's waiting outside for a taxicab.

And he's urinating on a cardboard placard, a sign on the ground. And he suddenly realizes it's a sign for Zephyr cigarettes. And he wrote the copy for that ad. And all of a sudden, this dream comes back. And he begins the long journey of fidelity to his dream.

As we pray this afternoon, what's it like to be faithful to your dream—to be intimate?

My oldest brother, shortly after his divorce, severed his relationship with our family and moved to Florida from Chicago. And I'm embarrassed, even ashamed, to say that it was four years since I had spoken with my brother. He would not respond to phone calls or missives of any kind.

But I suddenly realized I was about to celebrate a parish mission in Sarasota, Florida, and my brother, I knew, was living in Bradenton, the next town over. And so when I made reservations on the airlines, I did it a day early. I got a motel, hoping that I'd be able to connect with him.

It was a Friday night. I've got the address in my hand, and I'm ringing the doorbell, not even knowing if he still lives there. And my brother answers the door like I had just seen him that afternoon.

Older brothers are so weird. Anyhow, I'm the youngest of four boys. We suffer the most, let me tell you. I could give a whole homily on that, but I won't.

Well, my brother had prepared a very nice meal. He was living alone. And we talked till way after midnight. I said, "I've got to get some sleep," so I stayed there in a room.

And the next morning he had prepared coffee and toast and melon and stuff, and so I'm trying to pay attention to him. He's talking like he never could stop. And on the breakfast nook was the Sarasota Herald, the local newspaper, and a picture on the front page of a little boy, nine years of age, who was going through a tough round of chemotherapy.

What was noteworthy about the photograph was that the little fourth grader was surrounded by his classmates and the male teacher, all of whom had completely shaved their heads. They were so determined that their buddy would not feel left apart.

It was the best homily on Eucharist I'd ever heard—and no words. Pictures do tell a thousand words.

It wasn't just a story about a little kid with leukemia and kids that loved him. It was a story of two brothers that failed to keep in contact. We weren't faithful. We weren't people of integrity or intimacy. And so today we recommit ourselves to our loving God, that we might be faithful to God's love.

Rev. Jack Conley C.P.

St. Anns Solemn Novena
2026