

If you're a fan of the Discovery Channel, you may have come across a show entitled "Homestead Rescue." Each episode features an individual or family who is homesteading – that is, they want to live off the land. These folks also intend to live apart from and seek to be independent of anyone else in society. I believe the concept of homesteading appeals to Americans in particular because we embrace the ethos that we are rugged individualists at heart. It also plays into the notion that when Americans face a problem straight up, they can resolve it by "pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps", as the expression goes.

Every time I watch an episode of this show, however, I come to the conclusion which challenges those suppositions. While these homesteaders are rugged individualists and seek to live apart from others in society as much as possible, their very survival often depends upon the ingenuity and aid of others. The homesteads featured in every show are failing primarily because these individuals or families can't make a go of things by themselves.

It is more than ironic that these individuals and families cannot survive without the presence and intervention of others, though. "Homestead Rescue" features Marty Rainey, the patriarch of the family along with his daughter and son, Misty and Matt. At the height of a crisis and in the face of devastating loss, the Rainey's swoop in to save the homesteaders (along with some good-willed neighbors) who work together to make the homestead

viable. Despite the appearance of homesteading being a solitary life and an independent endeavor, it is only successful when folks meet up to make it work. In simpler terms, we are in this together.

With that in mind, it is not surprising that some may have a similar approach to living out our faith. How often have we heard others say, “I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious”? That phrase implies that these folks have some connection with God or the Divine. That in itself is good. But the phrase also implies that they have no time for or need of organized religion. In fact, I believe that when folks utter the phrase “I’m spiritual, but not religious” it implies that religion isn’t necessary and may even be something which is suspect. While seeking a connection with the Divine is good, doing so without the support of a religious community is risky. Seeking a relationship with God, but doing so without the support of religious mentors, a faith community, and centuries of people coming together in search of what is ultimately True, can potentially lead folks down a path that is at odds with what they are seeking in the first place. Rejecting organized religion can mean that **WE** become the moral compass for ourselves, that **WE** become the arbiter of what Jesus intended to teach in the scriptures, that **WE** become the measure of how we should or shouldn’t serve others.

There is an old saying about the legal profession that goes like this, “one who has himself as a lawyer, has a fool for a client.” I believe that phrase can be applied to spiritual and religious pursuits as well. The person who holds only himself up as the way to God can easily stray from the path that leads to what is truly holy, moral, and righteous. In my role as a pastor and

priest, I constantly have to check my own will, my own wants, and my own interpretations when preaching and when leading this church. At all times, I seek to balance those things with age-old traditions of the faith, the commonly accepted interpretation of scripture, and the prescriptions for service that have been passed on for countless generations.

No one saves themselves. We are saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And we experience the fulness of God's presence and his life saving grace in the context of a community of believers.

Community is everything. The writer John Donne exclaimed, "No man is an island, but part of a continent..." Helen Keller wrote, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." And St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta preached, "I can do things you cannot; you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things." Jesus confirms this when he states, "where two or more are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20).

These phrases seem to affirm what we discovered in today's first reading from the Book of Exodus. As the story unfolds, Moses is praying that the Hebrews will be successful in battle against Amalek. Moses' arms grew tired when praying. And when his hands and arms drooped, the enemy had the better of the fight. So Moses' assistants Aaron and Hur held up Moses' arms and provided a rock for him to sit on. With the support of Aaron and Hur, Moses' lengthy prayer vigil ended in victory for the Hebrews.

In a roundabout way, Jesus makes the same point when presenting the story about the widow and the unjust judge. When first hearing the story, we may think that the widow represents us. And we may think that the judge is God – who comes across at times as being aloof to our pleas; caving into those pleas and granting our petitions the more persistent we are in prayer. But the parable is a bit more complex.

In speaking about the widow, Jesus was elevating her in the eyes of his audience. Widows and orphans were to receive special treatment by all in Jesus' day since there was no social safety net which would provide for them. Jesus' audience would have been cheering on the widow – since she was so in need and so much like them. I think it's fair to say that some of the widow's confidence came from others – like the status that Jesus restored her to, as well as the audience who heard this parable and were in a similar life-situation as the widow was. Again, the woman was able to be persistent because of the community which surrounded her.

Persistence or a regular practice of the faith isn't always easy. By ourselves it is tough to pray. By ourselves, it is difficult to serve others. By ourselves, it is challenging to figure out Divine Truth. But with a Church community, that is combining with like-minded believers, we can persevere in prayer, good works, and our pursuit of God's Truth.

Over the last four days, our parish has celebrated our Fall Festival. The Fall Festival exists primarily to help further the mission of our Catholic school. The money we make on this festival goes directly to help form and educate our children in

mind, body, and spirit. This festival, as you can imagine, doesn't just happen. It isn't the result of one person alone working on it. The Fall Festival happens because a team of leaders, supported by dozens and dozens of volunteers, work together so that this event can be a blessing for our children and the community beyond the perimeter of our church and school property.

The Fall Festival is also successful because that team of leaders works persistently throughout the year in planning and implementing that plan.

Our practice of the faith – for it to be grounded, successful, and for it to flourish – must do the same. It must be rooted in the faith community. And it must be persistent, even when we don't always feel like going to Mass or serving others. Surrounded by a faith community and supported by the persistence of others, our faith becomes powerful and life-changing, for ourselves and others.

Years ago, when he was reflecting on his work with Habitat for Humanity as well as his role as a Sunday School teacher in Plains, GA, Jimmy Carter said this:

Each of us must rededicate ourselves to serving the common good. We are a community. Our individual fates are linked; our futures intertwined; and if we act in that knowledge and spirit together, as the Bible says, "we can move mountains."

We cannot move mountains by ourselves. We cannot turn hearts toward works of justice by ourselves. We will not finish the race of reaching God's Kingdom by ourselves. It is only as a

community of faith, individuals joining together, supporting and encouraging one another, that will be able to walk the walk of faith and reach the finish line which is eternal life. It is with and alongside a community of faith that the impossible becomes possible.

Amen? Amen!