

Most of you know I have a cat, Sammy, who lives with me in the rectory. And it would be true to say that I actually have two cats – since I have been taking care of the Church cat, Smokey, for a while. Over the years I have learned a few things by observing my cat’s personalities and behaviors --- so a story about a cat this morning who might teach us something --- on this cold January day. . . a cat appropriately named, Snowball.

Snowball was a plump and tidy ball of snow-white fur who seldom ventured outdoors. Her world was no larger than the 3-bedroom ranch house she allowed the Emmetts to share with her. Snowball’s horizons spanned little more than the view through the bay window, which gave her a good look at the backyard.

One day Mr. Emmett emptied Snowball’s litter box and carried it to the backyard for a refill. It was a bright summer afternoon when back doors are often left ajar. It had never been necessary to confine Snowball as she was content with her domain inside. But that day, she trailed a few steps behind Mr. Emmett and followed him to the sand pile.

Unnoticed, Snowball watch as he loaded the box with fresh sand. When Mr. Emmett turned to empty the last shovelful, he was surprised to see Snowball, who had hopped up into the litterbox – and was digging in.

“Snowball”, he exclaimed, “what are you doing in that little box when you’re surrounded by a truckload of sand?”

But then Mr. Emmett chuckled to himself as he pondered that irony. Oblivious to the mound of possibilities in every direction, Snowball’s horizons were limited to her habit of the box. Faced with the opportunity to expand and try something new, she stuck with what was familiar.

Believe it or not – and I find it rather hard to believe --- I have been with you for a year now. . . January 18-19, 2014 – was the first weekend I was with you. Back then, like today, we had a Gospel reading about John the Baptist – and in case you do not remember – I introduced myself as your new John the Baptist.

For what I was called to do then, as well as now – is to point you to Jesus: primarily through our celebration of Sunday Eucharist – and most especially through my preaching, but also through the celebration of the other Sacraments as well as just my day to day interactions with you --- I need to give you the help and grace you need to go out and find Jesus in your life.

And just as important -- to give you the skills to do what normally would be a social offense – to point to Jesus by your words and actions.

What an awesome responsibility we have!!  
So how have we done?

Certainly you have come to know over this year – that I think preaching is the most important thing I do all week – because it is usually the only shot I have at most of you to impact your week and your life.

You probably notice I don’t preach much about sin, guilt, or condemnation – not much fire and brimstone here --- primarily because I agree with St. John Chrysostom who once said you can catch a whole lot more flies with sugar than with vinegar. . .

I think Pope Francis is trying his best to teach the whole church this principle. . .

But also because I think people respond better when they know you are trying to encourage them, rather than criticize them. The Gospel is after all – GOOD news!

I try to slip in a few references from the Second Vatican Council whenever I can – because, to be honest with you – it is a little frustrating to know we are 50 years after the Council and how slooooooow some people are – to turn loose of pre-Vatican II thinking and ways --- like wondering why we don't ring bells at Mass ---- well if you haven't noticed -- the Mass is in English – so why would we need to be alerted to important parts of the Mass by ringing bells?

Or people still ask about *extreme unction* – when we've only been calling it the Sacrament of anointing of the sick for 50 years!

You know, we are all a lot like Snowball – we get awfully used to our ruts and routines – and find it hard to think “outside of the box” – but the best way to kill off the movement of the Holy Spirit among us in the Church is to say, “well we've always done it that way.” >>

Sometimes we are just a bit too comfortable saying, “well I don't need to get involved doing this or that – because someone else ALWAYS does this or that.” – and use that as an excuse for not offering our gifts and talents to the community. . .

We need to get out of our boxes – and know there is more than one way of doing something!

Yes over the last year, there have been some changes – and no doubt there will continue to be -- - as we stretch out of our comfort zones, get out of our boxes and try different ways of doing and seeing things – and growing in the knowledge God continues to break into our lives – but many times we miss him because we are still looking in all the old places. . .

I want to especially thank you for your embrace of the new Mass times – it has certainly made life for me and Calvin – as well as Suzanne and James – a bit less stressful and hectic. But of course the first thing I heard when I started talking about moving the Masses was, “but they have always been at that time.” Things can change – and sometimes it is better when they do.

I want to thank you for your kindness and patience as we have gotten to know each other. I also want to thank you for your generosity – not just to me at Christmas and throughout this past year – but your generosity to the parish. I don't preach about money too often, either. >>

But I will never tire of challenging you to use your time, talent, and treasure to build the kingdom of God in our midst. I also rely on some advice given me by my wise spiritual director of many years – Msgr. Bud Fidler – who said if you take care of the people of God – they will make sure they take care of the Church – and that's a challenge I give you as we start another year together--- to do your part in taking care of the Church by giving of your time, talent, and treasure. And to not be comfortable in saying – well somebody else ALWAYS does that. . .

The biggest challenge of all, though, is to be sure to listen – each and every day – to God speaking to you – many times in new ways – outside of our normal ruts and routines.

God's voice will often be quiet – and often comes unexpectedly as it did for Samuel. But God's voice is always persistent. Listen and respond to that voice. And the good news is we get to do that *together* – when we gather for Eucharist on Sunday.

Because we all have to have just a little MAGI in us – after they encounter the newborn Christ in Bethlehem – they returned to their homes by a different way.

Hopefully once we hear the good news here in this place – encounter the newborn Christ in his word and sacrament here in this place – then our lives are changed. We are somehow different than when we came – and we, too, need to return home by a different way: here we are Lord, we come to do your will.

May God continue to bless us in this new year of  
Grace.

