

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (August 7, 2011)
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The more we hear the Scripture readings at Mass or the more we read them ourselves, the more familiar we become with them—and logically enough. But even with that familiarity, we can easily skip over an important detail or two because our attention is focused elsewhere. Today's gospel is a good example. We all know the story of Jesus walking on the water, Peter wanting to do the same thing but then he began to sink. Jesus then had to rescue Peter, he who at that time was a man 'of little faith.' A dramatic story, to be sure. But did you catch that earlier detail provided by St. Matthew: "[Jesus] went up on the mountain by himself to pray." Jesus was obviously a very busy man; his work of preaching the kingdom of God and bringing healing (physical and spiritual) to those in need kept him constantly on the go during his public life and ministry. But Jesus Christ himself—the eternal, only-begotten Son of God—even Jesus knew not only his desire but also his need to take time for prayer and communion with his heavenly Father.

And if Jesus needed time in quiet prayer and personal communion with the eternal Father, how much more is that true for us—we who do not share in Jesus' sinlessness? We all know the critical importance of taking time for God and prayer; you would not be here at this Mass if you thought otherwise. But we also know what a challenge it is to make or find the time for quiet and prayer and communion with God. Often our responsibilities at work or at home keep us going at what seems like breakneck speed, with the result that we can be tempted to think "I don't have time to pray." Or the goal of finding a place of quiet and prayerful reflection can seem impossible in a world that seems to be getting noisier all the time—whether it is the TV blaring at home day and night or someone else's car stereo going full blast while waiting at a traffic light. Distractions, in other words, truly surround us...and they will drown out the voice of God if we allow it.

And in our own time, in this still-early stage of the 21st century, we face a particular and special set of challenges when it comes to strengthening our prayer life and our relationship with God. The electronic culture that surrounds us is becoming more and more pervasive; information technologies like the internet, cell phones, facebook, email, iPads and smartphones keep advancing every more quickly. Now, please do not misunderstand me—I am not at all condemning these things. Human ingenuity, after all, is a marvelous thing; in fact, it is a gift from God. And it is nothing less than astonishing what we are able to do now in this information age. In the internet, the whole library of human knowledge is literally at our fingertips. And it is now possible to be in instant communication—audio and visual—with anyone anywhere in the world. What a tremendous gift this has been: to be able to connect so easily and quickly with loved ones and dear friends, no matter where in the world they may be. Even the Church herself is talking more about the value and importance of using these new tools of communication in her work of evangelization and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. This is happening at the Vatican, and here at St. Edward and at CVCS we are beginning to look at ways to use these new tools more consistently and effectively in our own work and mission.

No doubt about it: there is great potential for good in all these new things, and much good is resulting from their use. But honesty compels us to acknowledge the other side of this technological coin. I am not even talking about the new capacity for sin and evil that exists in our hi-tech age—e.g. the plague of internet pornography, the breakup of marriages when one spouse has met someone else online, or children and young people who naively connect with online predators (those are subjects for a future homily). Instead, I refer today more generally to how easy it is to get so wrapped up in these devices that they become all-consuming in terms of time and energy and attention. Studies are showing more and more the impact; one recent survey found nearly half of the respondents say they check their work email after business hours and even on vacation. One out of every seven persons admitted they spend less time with their spouses because of time spent online. Again, there is no doubting the good and helpful elements of

our hi-tech age, but we also have to ask ourselves: what is the ever-increasing use (some even call it addiction) of these devices doing to our willingness and even our ability to nurture truly human and personal relationships with other people, and even more so with God? I have even heard that sometimes young people (and others not so young) actually bring their cell phones and iPhones to church and are texting back and forth with their friends during Mass itself. I am confident, of course, that that does not happen here at St. Edward. Allow me to repeat that: I am confident that that does not happen here!

I know many of you like to read Fr. Ron Rolheiser's column in the Witness, our archdiocesan newspaper. He really is a very insightful writer; earlier this year he had a column on this very subject. He wrote about the marvel and blessing of having available so much information and the ability to be in touch with others. The down side, however, is (in his words) "how it is changing our expectations and robbing us of the simple capacity to stop, shut off the machines, and rest." In other words, if we insist on our need to be in 24/7 contact with cyberspace, we will endanger our connection with the One who created and redeemed us and whose loving call to us may well be drowned out by all the noise and buzz from all our gadgets.

Even more troublesome is how these devices have the potential to become a substitute for God as our reason for being and our guidepost for life. Another article I came across recently referred to this: "As long as I stay plugged into the noise, the flashing images, and the gossip, I do not risk facing the terrifying silence during which I would be forced to confront that which is most real—the state of my interior life." If we are serious about the spiritual life and in loving and following the Lord Jesus, then we need to give him our whole and undivided attention. And that means that at least occasionally we need to turn off our phones, step away from the computer screen, and take a break from the blogs, the twitters and tweets and texting. Jesus loves us so much, he desires us so much that he wants us to focus completely on him without distraction.

Remember what Elijah went through in the first reading when he hid in the cave and was told the Lord would be passing by. Big, spectacular, attention-getting events like destructive winds, earthquakes and fires took place...but the Lord was not in those things. It was only when Elijah heard the "tiny, whispering sound" that the Lord presented himself. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said much the same thing: "We need to find God and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence."

Again: all our tech devices, like everything else we have, are neither good nor evil in themselves; it depends entirely on the use we make of them. Used wisely and moderately, they truly can help us deepen our relationship with God and with family and others close to us. Used to excess or for immoral purposes, they can turn us away from God and crowd him out of our life and even our awareness. They can lead us to an isolation and a self-absorption that can greatly harm if not destroy those vital relationships. As we heard in the gospel, Jesus took time to be with his heavenly Father in prayer—that personal communion with God was so important that he was away from Peter and the other disciples for that time. He was not available to them in order to be totally available to his Father in heaven. Can we shut off our computers, turn off our cell phones and otherwise leave the world of cyberspace at least on occasion so that we can be quietly aware of God who so often comes in that "tiny, whispering sound"?

