

REV. BILL GRINER
HOMILY FOR THE JUBILEE CELEBRATION
June 12, 2011

God it's good to be home! And I don't want to dwell on this, but to have Cass with me today, that's a real joy. Thank you Cass. You might not know, but Cass has been very sick. He's like the rest of us; he's getting old. But we come today, I think, to thank God for all those gifts that God has given to us and to praise God for that.

Fifty years Cass and I have been in this ministry, and it's marvelous. So I thought what I would do today would be sort of say how has the Spirit affected me during those 50 years. Now remember when Oprah was leaving her television show? It took her 3 hours to go through 25 years...(laughter). I don't want to hear no complaints on Griner.

When I was sick, you might remember that someone wrote a book for me. It was called "The Journey." And "The Journey" went through my sickness, my wellness and all that nonsense. I thought about what this life has been about the past 50 years – it's a journey. And I will cut it down to...there are many chapters in anybody's journey. You've got chapters in your journey, as we all have the same sort of journey. But I've cut it down to about five.

The first chapter of my journey would – who has influenced me? Where has the Spirit been in me through others. I have to say first of all, my Dad. He was a very quiet person, like me. Dad loved to fish. We'd go down to the foot of Broadway and fish for hours, but Dad never liked to catch a fish. He just liked to fish. So we never caught any to bring home; we just sat there. I learned that gift of patience.

And then a man...Cass and I went to the same grade school and high school together...Fr. John Talbot Spalding was a man who came through. Some of you might remember John Talbot. John Talbot was one of those men who was fierce. And he could get angry. When he got angry, his eyes rolled in the back of his head. And then the book would come flying. The two things went together – the eyes rolled like a slot machine, and then out came the book. But John Talbot was a magnificent person. He was an artist. He was a dramatist. He loved to do big things. And he loved the kids. We had a Chumma club. Remember the clubs in those days? We had what was called Chumma club. John was always there. So he was a tremendous influence all the way through. I've always said, whatever I've done, a piece of John Talbot has always been in there.

I guess the third man would be Fr. Jim de Manuela. Many of you again know Jim. Jim is a fantastically good liturgist. Very creative. Very open to the Spirit. Very loving and very kind. I learned a lot from him.

Joe Vest was another one. You know the name Joe. I was very proud of Joe, and he taught me a lot about being honest. When he stood up at the Metro Council and said, "I am a gay priest," that took a lot of guts in those days. Nobody was saying it, but Joe Vest stood there. And all the stuff that he took because of that, Joe was really a good model.

Strangely enough as I've been thinking about it, Jim Flynn. Everybody knows Jim Flynn. God Jim, you know. That's who Jim Flynn is. His first name is God. Followed by Dick Fowler. But I learned from Jim in the early days when I was in the seminary, Jim and Dick were in the choir together. And the thing that I aspired to was being an escola of the choir. He was already there, and you aspired to be just like him. Well, as you've noticed, I really can't sing, but I got to make it to that choir. And it was a marvelous thing.

That was part of the image of what brought me together, and people who had been there – liturgists, creatures, all kinds of good people.

The second chapter of the life might be – what has it been like? Well, I have to say it has been both good and bad. Nobody who lives life more than three days knows it's not all good. You understand don't you? It was a sad part of my life, thank you. So there have always been goods and bads. I have to say that the bad part was I was ordained only a very few years when one of the pastors of our parishes came up to me in a meeting saying, "I'm ashamed to be in the same priesthood with you." That hurt. The other thing, and one of my buddies, Tom Barrett is here this morning, when we were teaching at St. Thomas together. After St. Thomas, the Second Vatican Council had come along and St. Thomas was losing students, Tom and I were called into the big boss' office, and big boss says, "I'm holding you," Tom and me, "personally responsible for the closing of this seminary." If we thought we had that kind of power, we'd have done much better than that!

The first parish I went to, I was there a few days-weeks, and one of the people came up and said, "Well Father, you're starving our pastor." I would have liked to have starved a lot of pastors, but that particular one was alright. But I had eaten his peanut butter. (laughter) Same parish, and one of the parish council members

came up after I was there a little bit, and said, “We don’t know whether we can trust you or not.” Not that man, he got the wrath of Griner.

And then I moved to the next parish, a lot of stuff in between, and I went to the parish and the second day I was there I got an anonymous letter. I love anonymous letters. They give you a chance to say what’s really on your mind. So this anonymous letter came through on the second day and said, “We don’t want you. We know that you are changing our church.” Now what I had done on the first day, I moved one chair from there to there. (laughter) That bothered me.

The next parish I went to, someone in authority said, “Father, we know why you’ve been sent here. You want us to go back and become whatever the bishop wants us to be.” I had never talked to the bishop about a thing.

So they are the hard times. I haven’t had a whole lot of hard times, but they are hard times. The good times...you reflect upon the good times in your life. Now most of you know, there’s a doctor sitting back over there, once you’ve had anesthesia, you don’t remember much before that. And one good medicine to take is Versid. Versid will wipe out most of everything. It wiped out my brain. But one of the good memories that I really do remember is early in my ministry again, some young girl, we were teaching in the seminary, a girl came up and she told her mother, “I really like him. He’s a people priest.” I thought that was a high compliment in the early part of my ministry.

As things went on, and I do tend to look at those, I remember dancing at my Mother’s funeral. Many of you were there that night that I took the incense bowl and lost myself. I absolutely forgot where I was. I had a bowl in my hands and Mother’s body in front of me; I began to dance around that table. It was very memorable, very enlivening and very enriching for me. Something I’ve never forgotten, and every time I incense a body now, I’m very, very particular about how I do it.

The other occasion that I think really influenced me with the Spirit, and again you were part of it, when I walked in...I remember the first homily that I gave...and I’ll get back to that. When I walked in on Thanksgiving afternoon; about eleven o’clock we had mass, and I had just gotten out of the hospital. I got to the end of the pew, and I said I don’t know if I can make it or not. I was so weak and so unbelievably weak that I could hardly stand. I started down the aisle and everybody stood up and said welcome home. That was remarkable. And it sustained me. It gave me life. I gave me a moment that I will never forget,

because all of a sudden, all those people who had been praying for me – Catholics, Baptists, and I got letters from everybody – they were all there in the room. And they were saying, “Thank you God for giving him back to us.” It was a moment I’ll never forget.

Homilies that I’ll never forget. I only had about three, and I determined a long time ago, and again I think it was here that my whole preaching style, I think, changed. When I was first ordained, I had a homily called “The Man in Love.” I used that sucker until it went out of existence. I only had one. Why would I need another one? So I kept giving different refrains on the man in love, whether it was a wedding homily, an ordination homily, whatever it was, and the priest was the man in love. BPPPT!!! (laughter) I moved from that when a girl told me one day – I was going to have her wedding – and she says, “Father, I don’t want any old burnt out homily that you’ve given before.” (laughter) So I gave that one up!

I went to the next one, which was called – and you remember this one – “The Rubber Duck.” Heh, heh, heh. I think I gave that up recently too. I gave it up basically because a 14 year old boy at Incarnation parish, he came up before Easter, he said, “Father, are you going to give the Rubber Duck homily again?” End of Rubber Duck. (laughter)

But I’m scared of preaching. I don’t like to preach. Nobody understands that. Until the day that I came and met you. And I remember the day that I came here and said: I don’t have this, I don’t have that, I don’t have this. But what I do have I will give you. I’m not as passionate as Jim Flynn. I’m not as artistic as Cass Volpert. I’m not as organized as Joe Graffis. I don’t have any of that. But all I have is my love, and I can give that to you. From that moment, I began to preach God’s love for us. How much God loves us and how much we can love God in return. And that changed my preaching completely. I do not have to be intelligent. It did not have to come from up here (pointing to his head). I had to be sure it was coming out of here (covering his heart). There’s a balance back and forth, but I had to preach love rather than law. I had to preach goodness rather than anything else.

How’re our chapters doing? How’s Oprah doing? (Someone says, “2 minutes.”) Two minutes. That’s more than they gave me last night.

And then another influence I think in my life was Vatican II. Cass and I were ordained in the church before Vatican II. We had our first masses against a wall, and the people were back there. Vatican II came along with all of its good stuff.

It's openness and it's Spirit-filled church. I learned very quickly, it became to be known as "Grinerisms." The first Grinerism is "We are the church." We are hierarchally disposed. We have a hierarchy, but we are the church. And the Spirit speaks to you as well as me. The Spirit speaks to each of us. And only if I stood in your midst could I tell what the Spirit was saying. Not in front, not in back, but if I stood in the midst, WE could hear the voice of the Spirit speaking, and that voice gave us something to say. So we are the church.

The second thing I learned in those days was the church is our home. It's not God's house. It's our home. And we invite God here. And God says, "Yes." The building is our building, and God loves us so much that when we invite him with that great "Amen" at the end of the prayer, God says, "Yes, I want to be with you in your home." And so we treat this as our home - a place to laugh, a place to cry, a place to be who you are. You don't have to be anybody else.

The third one was the table. It wasn't the table of the Lord. It was OUR table, to which we would bring bread and wine, simple gifts, and ask God to be present to those simple gifts. And he said, "Yes." That's who much he loves us. He said, "Yes." If you say these particular words, if you act in this particular way, I want to be part of that. And it is OUR table.

And so many things, we learned. We don't come to the table just to eat and go home. We come to the table. We come hungry. We come hungry to be fed because we need the Lord for life. We need the Lord for strength. And so we just don't come to the table. We don't come to church. We come to BE church. And to be fed by that food of the Lord.

And then for the last chapter. I guess it really is about you. How you have influenced my life, as well as everybody else has. Maybe it is because this was my last place, and maybe because of the illness that I experienced among you, it really has changed, I think, not who I am, but HOW I am. I think I have become much more aware of who you are. It isn't about me. It isn't about all the glamour, whatever. It's about us. Walking together to the kingdom. And what a privilege it was to take bodies and say, "Lord, here's another one of your servants, take them home." What a privilege it was to have a young couple, vowing their love to one another. I don't know if I could ever do that or not, but what a magnificent thing to experience. Or to hold a baby, and say "yes" Lord, that's life. I never had that chance to be a father. But you are my family. You see, Dad told me the very first day I was ordained, and it held true. I don't have a family except you. Dad said the day I was ordained, your family just grew. We are no longer just us; we are not

just your family. Your family is the church. Your family is the people who gather around you. Your family is the people you are called to love and to be loved by. Your family is the one you will cry with, you laugh with, you party with, and you pray with. Your family is the one who you work with. And I think I learned that here. I was challenged. I was challenged to go to Nicaragua and Haiti. I was challenged to stretch myself, but that was always good. That's what families do. They challenge each other for growth.

So the chapter of 50 years, I'm sure that Cass has another book; different stories, same chapters. And all of us do. So I would just encourage you today to write your own book. Go home and put down. What are your influences of your early life? What remarkable things have you done, happened to you? What turmoil have you had and what did you learn from it? What have you learned about being the church of Jesus? What have you learned about being part of the Epiphany community? Maybe that's what it's all about.

We're going to go back to the altar now, our altar, our table; and I hope that we will lead it in song, in praise and in goodness. Thank you very, very much for the years I was here and the 50 years of priesthood.