

Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9: 1-41

Allow me to begin by stating the obvious...THIS IS VERY STRANGE! It's 11:00 AM on a Sunday morning and the church is empty. Typically, this place is full of people (at least by now) and there's not an empty space in the parking lot and the streets of the neighborhood are lined with cars. But not today, this church and churches all across the country and indeed the whole world, stand empty. And who would have thought this could happen? Who would have thought that all public Masses would be temporarily suspended? Who would have thought that instead of looking into your faces to preach this homily today I would be looking into a camera instead?

And I can only imagine how strange this must be for you. Sitting in your living room or at your dining room table and watching Mass on your laptop or on your phone or a smart TV. Trying to figure out how all of this works. Do I make the responses? Do I make the sign of the cross? Do I sit and stand and kneel like we do in church? I've never been to Mass sitting on a sofa with my dog on my lap. TV Masses have been around for a long time but not like they are today! I have been amazed and, in some cases, utterly surprised by the number of priests who before this week could barely send an email but now are hosting live stream Masses, making podcasts and virtual stations of the cross and praying the rosary online! All of this reveals to me the need that exists within every disciple to evangelize and in times like these when ordinary ways are shut off or temporarily suspended, new ways will emerge so that the gospel message will be proclaimed.

When it comes to watching Mass on TV in your home, my suggestion is that you make it special, rearrange the furniture, light a candle, set a Bible open to the gospel of the day, put a crucifix out, a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary or our beloved patron, St. Francis of Assisi. And, by all means, make the responses, stand, sit and kneel just like you would in church, sing if you can tolerate each other's voices, and most importantly pray together as a family and with Catholic Christians throughout the world. This is what our world needs more than anything right now and it's what we all need when there is so much fear and anxiety.

As strange as all of this may seem for you and for me it is for a good reason. The COVID-19 pandemic is serious and it is spreading throughout our country and state and we need to do whatever we can to stop that spread so that the most vulnerable and high-risk members of our community will be protected and our hospitals won't be overwhelmed. This separation, if you think about it, is really an act of charity. It is painful and it is difficult and we all wish it would end sooner than later, but for now our separation from each other and from our Lord in the Eucharist is necessary in order to protect ourselves

and one another. And what better message can we profess and live than what Jesus tells us in the gospel: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength [and]...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Just a few weeks ago all of us were talking about how divided our country had become, but now we are forced to put all of that aside and come together, united in a single purpose, for the good of all.

Today I ask you to pray in a special way for all those who are sick and for those who care for them—especially all health care professionals who are on the front line of this pandemic. And pray for the people of Italy who have been especially devastated by the coronavirus and for all those who have died. May they rest in peace.

It is interesting, that at a time when we are not permitted to touch one another and bodily fluids are considered toxic and to be avoided at all costs, a man blind from birth encounters Jesus in the gospel and when he meets him Jesus spits on the ground and makes clay with his saliva, and then smears the clay on the blind man’s eyes! It is bad enough that Jesus didn’t “social distance” but he rubs spit on the poor man’s eyes! In a time when we are keeping our distance from one another Jesus performs one of the most “hands-on” miracles found in sacred scripture.

But the miracle he performs is not just about curing the man’s physical sight which is revealed by his touch and the spit and the clay, but also the forgiveness of his sins which in the scriptures are closely associated with maladies like blindness but also hinge on a person’s desire to be healed and to be forgiven. In the beginning of the story the blind man is a beggar who used to sit and beg for food and money, but at the end of the story he is a seeing man who begs for mercy, “Jesus says to him, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered and said, ‘Who is he, sir, that I many believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘I do believe, Lord’ and worshipped him.”

My brothers and sisters, today the blind man in the gospel who now can see invites us to see the Lord and worship him in this moment in our life.

Sometimes when things are taken away from us or are no longer available to us—things we depend upon, things we need, things that give our life meaning and purpose or when life changes so drastically (as it has over the past week) and we suddenly realize what we’ve been missing—we begin to see with new eyes and appreciate with a deeper devotion those things we long for and desire or those things we’ve taken for granted.

Lent is supposed to be a time of sacrifice and transformation and reconciliation as we prepare for Easter. But this year, with this current situation, it’s off the scale! This just

may be the greatest Lent of all time! Forcing us to recognize that we beg not only for physical healing and protection from illness and a restored connection with one another, but a spiritual healing that hinges on the repentance of our sins and our desire to change our life so that we may see Jesus for who he truly is, the Son of Man, who takes away the sins of the world.

This Sunday is Laetare Sunday. The word “laetare” comes from the entrance antiphon from today’s Mass, “Rejoice, O Jerusalem...Be joyful, all who were in mourning.” It means “rejoice.” So, what could we possibly be joyful about this Sunday? What is our cause for rejoicing amid this current crisis?

That we believe in what we cannot see.

That we see what we long to touch.

And that we worship the Son of Man, who heals us and forgives us now and forever.

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