

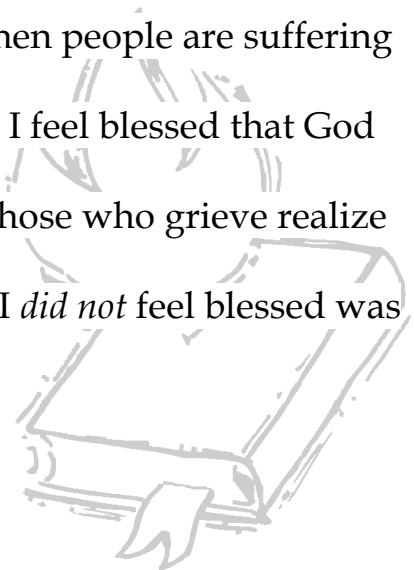
Homily
31st Sunday OT - C
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
November 02-03, 2019

Wis 11: 22 - 12: 1
Ps 145: 1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13, 14
2 Thes 1: 11 - 2: 2
Lk 19: 1-10

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I celebrated Christmas on Halloween (of course when St. Anne's is hosting a Flea Market with Christmas Items on November 2nd, then I'm not the only one committing this GRAVE sin!!!).

Now I need to explain...

I want to thank Fr. Fanale for covering my 8:00 a.m. All Saints' Day Mass on November 1st. The first Friday of every month, I have been assigned to minister at the Jerome Combs Detention Center for those undocumented folks who are being sent out of the country. As I preached last month, watching families being split apart breaks my heart, regardless of the political reasons for doing so. My responsibility is to minister to the people in front of me and when people are suffering (regardless of *who* they are), so does the Church. I feel blessed that God allows me to be a vessel for the divine, helping those who grieve realize that they are not alone in their suffering. Where I *did not* feel blessed was



that I had to wake up at 4:00 a.m. in order to get myself ready to travel into Kankakee, which is penance enough for any sins I may have committed...

After my time at the detention center, I had a chance to visit with the Van Drunen folks over a grilled cheese sandwich lunch. What folks like Van Drunen do for this community is extremely important. When over a thousand workers in this city are of Hispanic origin (the great majority of which working at Van Drunen), they and I realize that the more we allow this section from our garden of faith to grow in Momence, the more secure we will be that this parish will be around to serve all Catholics for generations to come.

After lunch, I returned to St. Patrick's Church to continue updating the rectory, which is moving along in the next phase of our renovation project. As we have done at St. Anne's, we have replaced all the flooring in the rectory with Pergo laminate and have done a good "Fall Cleaning" of the house with the help of Fr. Dan Hessling and Jack Noonan. On Friday, we were in the midst of rewiring all the computer cables and setting up the office and living areas of the house.

By the time I returned to St. Anne's for my long evening's nap, I was really tired from a good day of ministry. Towards that end, I was going to take a nice long bath and ten-hour sleep when the doorbell rang at 5:30 p.m. Needless to say, I was in no condition to welcome guests, considering my waning condition over a lack of sleep.

As I opened the door to see who was calling, I was confronted by two seven-year olds, dressed to the hilt in their Halloween attire. Because I am not always attune to the surroundings around me, I had to ask the kids what day it was, thinking that Halloween was the night before. I knew that Fr. Fanale celebrated the All Saints' Day Mass for me in the morning - I was pondering as to whether Daylight Savings Time actually moved the clock back twenty-four hours.

No one told me that because of the Halloween snowfall, the kids were allowed to engage in "trick or treat" activities the following day. I looked up Halloween snowfall information on the computer and found out that the last time snow touched the Chicago landscape on Halloween was 1994. Prior to that, the last time snowfall happened on Halloween was 1954. I guess that snow has touched the Chicagoland

area on Halloween only seven times since 1884 altogether, according to the WGN television website that I referenced

(<https://wgntv.com/2019/10/30/when-was-the-last-time-we-have-had-measurable-snow-for-halloween/>).

I also realized this fateful November 1st that in the twenty-three years I have served as a Catholic priest, I have *never* had anyone come to my house for trick-or-treat activities. For the hour and a half that was left for this activity on November 1st, I started thinking that St. Anne's imported all the kids from the Chicagoland area to stop by my house for candy. My only problem was that I was not ready for visitors, certainly not ready for kids and I had no candy to hand out that evening.

As these two innocently decorated children stood by my door waiting for their Halloween confections, two thoughts crossed my mind. First, I wondered if these kids actually were armed with "tricks" for the Catholic priest who did not possess any Halloween candy. Second, it dawned on me that I still possessed candy canes (bastones de dulce) from last year's Christmas Season. Thus, pulling out my bucket of Sam's Club Candy canes from last year, I filled the children's bag with stale

confections from 2018 (to be honest, since when does sugar really go bad? Candy canes are like Twinkies – their shelf life can last for millennia).

So, for the first hundred kids that seemingly passed in front of my house, I greeted their “Trick or Treat” with “Merry Christmas,” reminding myself that the history of the candy cane often is associated with the 18th Century story of a candy maker who supposedly bent a peppermint stick accidentally. Realizing that the stick looked like a “J” for “Jesus,” the candy maker started passing out this candy as a Christmas confection. Others chose to turn the “J” upside down, thus the origin of the candy cane, according to tradition.

After I passed out half the bucket of candy canes, I realized that somewhere in my house I had a case of “Nerds” (Pazguatos) candy that I was given as a joke, me being the priest “nerd.” Realizing that I was a “nerd for Jesus,” I ended up filling the subsequent Halloween bags with both Nerds and candy canes, thus making sure that I had enough candy to make it through 7:00 p.m., when the trick or treat endeavor came to an end. By the time the kids stopped ringing my doorbell, I was

counting the seconds, hoping that I would make it through the night with enough candy to satisfy the kids.

As I reflected on what had happened on this Halloween activity one day late, I started to reflect on how the kids were as much of a nerd as I was. Who would dress up in Halloween costumes on All Saints' Day. In fact, if I remember correctly, on the evening prior to All Saints Day, children in the early centuries of the Church often dressed up like saints in commemoration of this Solemnity of the Church. Hopefully in today's age, children understand the difference between the fantasies of the Halloween mythology and the spirituality of the Angels and Saints (or at least I hope the parents teach our kids the difference between the two) but I was hoping and dreaming that *one child* would have dressed up as St. Jerome on Halloween, rang my doorbell and stated to me, "Hello, I am St. Jerome. I translated the entire bible into Latin in the 5th Century. Now please give me some candy." Had a kid done that, I would have given that child my entire box of Nerds, acknowledging that the child was the King or Queen of Catholic Nerds, deserving of all my candy.

In reality, we all should be Christian nerds; in reality, *we all are*. All of us are sinners; all of us are weak. As many in society tear others down and demean others to build themselves up, imagine what God could say about each and every one of us in relation to the divine? There is a part of the “Zacchaeus” story that is part of all of us, since in relation to God, each and every one of us is in dire need of redemption for the things that we do.

That said, look how powerful the presence of the Lord affected the character of Zacchaeus in today’s gospel and the response that Zacchaeus presented to the Lord in that great act of humility. Our Lord could have rejected Zacchaeus altogether, considering what kind of life this tax collector chose to live. Instead, the Lord embraced the sinner, offering him the invitation to reform his life, which Zacchaeus did for the sake of his salvation.

As I was passing out candy canes and Nerds to these children, I saw this as an opportunity for evangelization, showing kids that even a priest can play a role in the secular life and meet the kids at their level. In the process, neighbors I have not yet met were introducing

themselves to me, telling me how their kids love to torment my dog and how glad they were to welcome me into the community. For a couple of hours, I was able to participate in a community event and allow others to learn about me as much as I was able to learn about them. Maybe I also was able to make a few kids happy in the process.

May we all learn that great evangelization and lessons about God can be found in the simple activities of human life. May we all be dedicated “Nerds for Jesus” in whatever activities in which we engage in life, realizing that all we do should be filtered in the eyes of love... at least I learned about this for a couple hours on the evening of November 1st where I exchanged an opportunity for sleep with a good lesson about faith. May we all embrace and share these lessons of faith with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.