

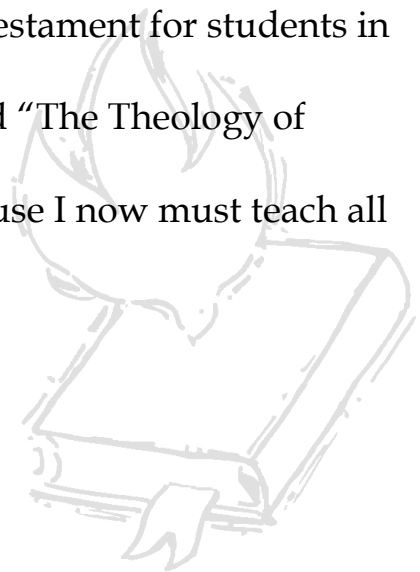
Homily
3rd Sunday of Lent – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
March 14-15, 2020

Ex 17: 3-7
Ps 95: 1-2, 6-7, 8-9
Rm 5: 1-2, 5-8
Jn 4: 5-42

Over the last few days with humanity in general going crazy with the coronavirus, many bishops (including our own in Joliet) have put out notices that Masses have been cancelled, Catholic schools are suspending classes and that big crowds of over 250 in attendance should not take place. Even at the university where I teach, we have been told that until April 13th all of us professors will need to teach all our courses online.

Now, I teach three online courses this semester at the University of St. Francis in Joliet. I teach an introductory course of theology to a group of nurses, I teach an online course in the New Testament for students in the upper grades and I also teach a course called “The Theology of Death and Dying” as a specialized course. Because I now must teach all

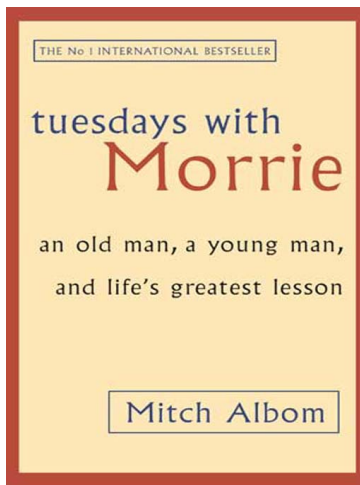


these courses online, I ended up having to work a whole lot more on the computer that I normally do.

As you know, when we've told that the coronavirus is causing us to teach all of our courses online, that the elder folks are being quarantined at care facilities and that the rest of the general public are acting in a state of panic, I start thinking about what I have been teaching in my Death and Dying course. In this course, I begin the course by teaching the students about the universal symbols that we utilize in this world – holding a hand up to say “hello” or crossing the arms over your chest as a sign of love. I also show the students the universal sign of panic in the world by waving your arms about your head in a frantic way.

Over the last few week, suddenly, a good number of folks are panicking; a good number of folks are worried. Many in the world are is afraid that they're going to catch this virus. Now there is a difference between prudence and panic. Prudence is about acting calmly and responsibly, like learning how to wash your hands before you come to the table, similar to the way we call to mind our sins at the Penitential

Rite at Mass. A prudent individual keeps up with appearances; the prudent individual keeps up with hygiene. Responsible folks make sure that if they are sick, they stay home and avoid contact with others. Responsible and prudent folks make sure that they take care of themselves, their bodies, minds and spirits. Sometimes individuals forget these manners of common sense. Like many things in life, individuals take basic manners and hygiene for granted and then the ills of the world creep in the normal course of life.



I was thinking about how, in the first class of my Death and Dying course about a book I introduced to the students called, "Tuesdays with Morrie." The book was written in 1997 and became a New York Times bestseller in 2000.

Eventually, the book was made into a television film that starred Jack Lemmon and Hank Azaria. You can find that movie on YouTube. The book is about a professor named Maurice Schwartz who was dying of ALS (or Lou Gehrig's disease).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2I8jryI97U&list=PL9380FC740612784E>)

Towards the end of his life, Morrie was interviewed by Ted Koppel on a late-night program called Nightline, as Ted interviewed this professor of sociology about how he endured the great suffering of this disease. One of the students that took his sociology class was named Mitch Albom, a music major in college who eventually became a sportswriter in Detroit.

As the story is told, Mitch had pretty much forgotten about his purpose in life and his promise to Morrie that he would keep in touch with his professor. As the tolls of his job took Mitch further away from his true purpose in life, Mitch immersed himself in all thing sports - sports, sports and more sports consumed him and Mitch laments how empty his life had become.

During one late night of work, Mitch ended up turning on the TV and he saw his old sociology professor talking about issues of life and death. As a result, Mitch decided to visit Morrie, subsequently coming

to this man's home every Tuesday (hence the title of the book). During these Tuesday sessions, the two of them started talking about the things that really mattered in life.

Morrie had this philosophy of life that stated, "Once you learn how to die, then you learn how to live." In support of this view, Morrie would talk about how we are so attached with so many empty "things" in life that we forget about life's purpose and how we are blessed when we embrace that purpose. In many ways, Morrie's view parallels that to the Buddhist way of life - that life involves suffering, suffering is the result of desires, that you get rid of the desires to rid yourself of suffering and that the way to get rid of desires is through what Buddhists call an eight fold path (Right Understanding, Right Mind and so forth). Right?

In my reflecting of Morrie's words, I was thinking about the Catholic parallelism to the Buddhist way of life, that life does involve suffering, but suffering in the Catholic context is more about us giving into temptation. We gave into temptation in the garden, we gave temptation

in the wandering in the wilderness. We gave into the temptation with not believing that Jesus is the Christ and the gospel reading from today, that we are more involved with things of earth than the things eternal. In the process, we lose our hope by our attachments to the things of earth and the things of sin and lose hope as to what life's meaning really is (that's our second reading). In this life of attachment, we lose our hope, we lose our way and then we let these things of the world get to us. Life involves suffering and suffering as a result of temptations and the result of sin. In the Catholic context, if you want to get rid of suffering and if you want to get rid of the temptations and the sin, the way you do that is to focus on a life of prayer. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are the ways Jesus teaches us to focus on God in the Book of Matthew (6: 1-18, the gospel from Ash Wednesday).

According to Morrie, he would say that once you learn how to die, it is then you really appreciate life. Look, we are all going to go one day; that's just a reality of life. If we face the reality of life, I teach that students that as a rule, about 60% of all deaths that take place in this

country happen from heart disease or from cancer. That said, our media reforms our understanding of death in such a disproportionate way by focusing on 60% of their stories of death about terrorism and violent deaths and suicides. The media prefers to generate stories about the horrors of life over life's purpose and realities (see graph at the end of this homily).

In effect, the media and *society want* to form us and tell us how we should act and how we should panic and how should we should fear and go out and buy the pure rally, go out and buy the water and go out and buy the toilet paper - go buy, Buy, BUY!!! That's the way to solve the problem. In the world of faith, we realize that we live in this world as a result of us sinning in garden and NOT wanting to live with God in this life of perfection. For those of faith, we want to return to that metaphorical garden, the New Eden, the New Jerusalem - the kingdom of heaven. We want to go back, and we realize the way to do that is through love, is through Christian charity. We return to God not by abandoning the Church but by *embracing* it, by embracing God and

realizing that God is the well from today's gospel, that God is the well that will give us everlasting life that the well from which the Samaritan woman draws water never can. If we understand that, if we understand that we need to continually return to Christ, return to this life of prayer, not to abandon the sacraments, but to embrace them, to find a way to connect ourselves, it is *then* that we understand that the Church is not something from which we should flee during a time of crisis but an institution which we should embrace and of which we should never let go.

For this reason, I tell you, at least in the parishes I serve, if you want communion, call us. If you want confession, if you want the anointing of the sick, whatever it is, call us. We will come to visit you. We will come to pay a pastoral call because that is not just our job; it is our honor and our privilege. It is our responsibility to serve you out of love and we are so joyful to do it.

During my reflections this week, I was thinking of Saint Damien de Veuster. He is one of the thirteen saints that are attributed to the United

States. In the late 19th Century, St. Damien chose to minister into one of the islands of Hawaii, the island of Molokai, to live with those who had Hansen's disease. Damien knew that by doing so, he would probably contract the disease himself, but he had so much love for his ministry that he followed God's will, not his own desires and wants. Damien thought to himself, if I walk into this colony and if I do what God asks me to do, it is not about how much I live but it is about the way I die. St. Damien knew that if he "die" for others (in this case, literally), whether a parent does this for a child or a priest does this for a community or this Saint did for those who are suffering, if we give our hearts to the ones we are commissioned to serve, regardless of the sufferings that are involved, then we are doing God's will.

If we suffer in this way, we realize as Christians that the other side of life has no suffering nor tears nor sadness. If we live a life of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, if we are doing this right, then what experience on the other side of life is an everlasting peace. If we have that peace in our hearts right now (what St. John's Gospel calls a

“Realized Eschatology”), we know that we walk out into this world and we are going to have all these sufferings because that’s what the world does but if we have this peace in our hearts, it just doesn’t matter what happens in the world because we have a love of God and of our neighbor... and that is enough – *more* than enough.

Love your God. Do unto others. Follow the commandments; follow the precepts. Live a life of prayer and all is good because no one can take or scare the soul from you, no one can scare off or take away your heart. No one can take God’s love from you as long as you embrace it and nourish it. If we embrace the presence of God... something will always befall us... and that’s life. All of us one day are going to go, but if we make our lives a good life, then all is well.

We realize that all of us will get sick and that every one of us is going to die. Once we get past that, then the well we approach is the one that gives us life everlasting. When was the last time we called our family or called our friends, told them we loved them, gave them a hug, to give them a kind word to make sure that they know that they’re not

forgotten and lost? That type of love, the one that acknowledges that we do not take our lives for granted, means so much more than the fear and trepidation that our society wants us to live through the fear and anguish that they broadcast.

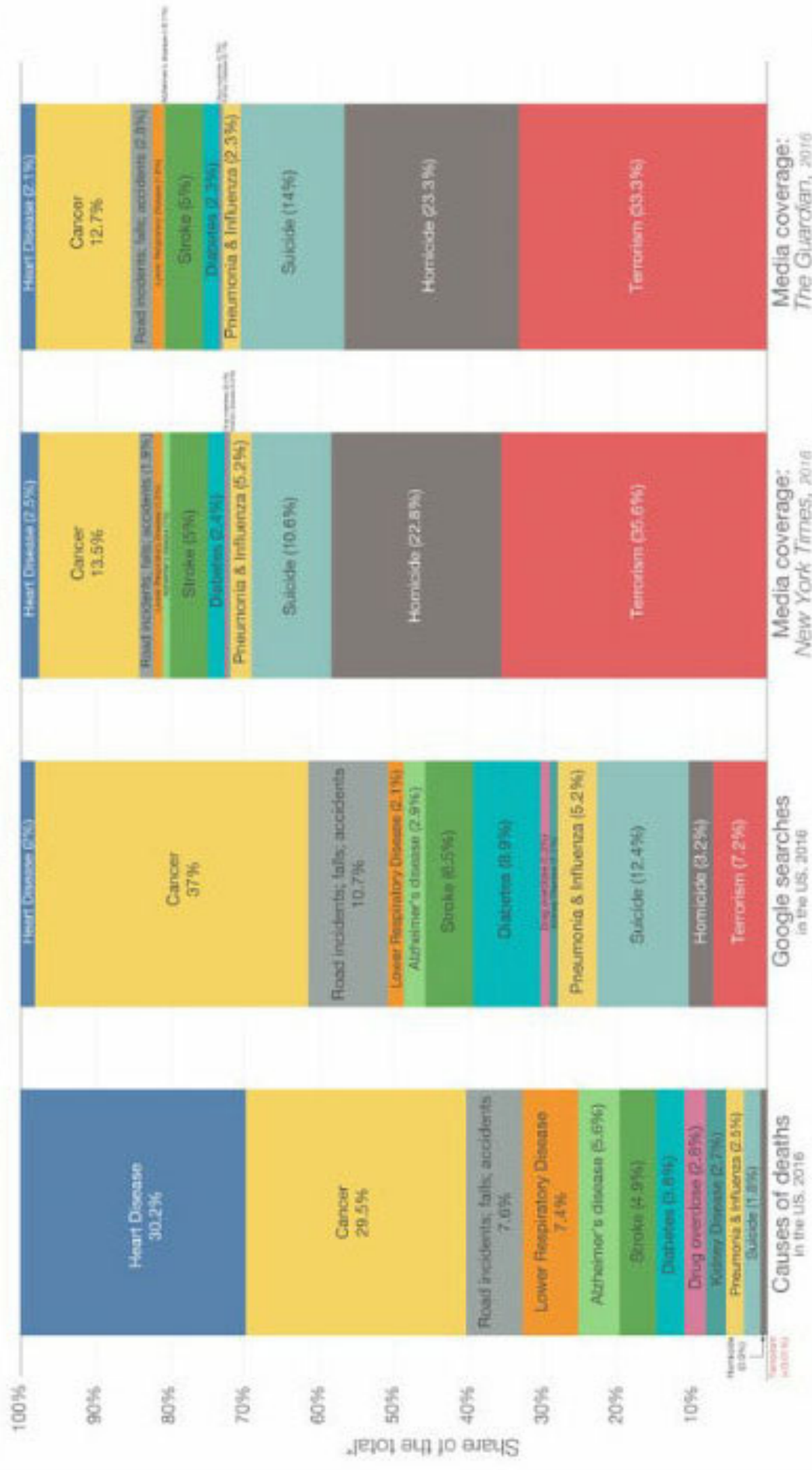
Maury Schwartz would say, don't let society define your culture; define your own culture. Live a good life. I think that is what Christ was trying to say in our gospel reading today. Christ tried to show the Samaritan woman where the source of life really was, not the source of life that'll get you through a day but the source of life that will get you through the rest of your existence.

Let's give thanks to God in our lives for that presence of Christ. Let's give thanks to the people in our community. Say a prayer for those who are sick. Always be safe. Be prudent, be loving and do not panic. As Christ tells us in John's gospel (14: 1-2) "Have faith in God; also have faith in me for in my Father's house are many dwelling places." Please know that we keep praying for you. May God bless you. This is our prayer.

Causes of death in the US

What Americans die from, what they search on Google, and what the media reports on

Our World
in Data



*This represents each cause's share of the top ten causes of death in the US plus homicides, drug overdoses and terrorism. Collectively these 13 causes accounted for approximately 88% of deaths in the US in 2016. Full breakdown of causes of death can be found at the CDC's WONDER public health database: <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>

Based on data from Shen et al (2016) - Deaths, reality vs. reported. All data available at: <https://owid.worldbank.org/graphs/charting-deaths>. All data refers to 2016.

Not all causes of death are shown. Shown is the data on the ten leading causes of death in the United States plus drug overdoses, homicides and terrorism. All values are normalized to 100%, they represent their relative share of the top causes, rather than absolute counts (e.g. deaths represents each cause's share of deaths within the 13 categories shown rather than total deaths). The causes of death shown here account for approximately 88% of total deaths in the United States in 2016.

This is a visualization from OurWorldinData.org, where you find data and research on how the world is changing. Licensed under CC-BY by the authors Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser.