

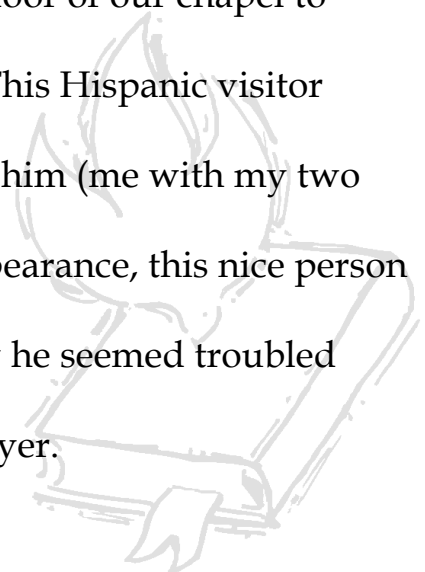
Homily
4th Sunday of Lent - C

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
March 30-31, 2019

Jos 5: 9, 10-12
Ps 34: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7
2 Cor 5: 17-21
Lk 15: 1-5, 11-32

A few years ago, I was celebrating the 7:00 Wednesday evening Mass at my former parish in Spanish when the most unlikely of visitors made a cameo appearance right in the middle of the homily I was preaching. Ironically enough, the topic of my homily was about reconciliation and our need to resolve our sins with God and society so that *“not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law”* (Mt 5: 18) until the message of God reveals itself fully.

So there we all were, settled into the liturgy in whatever disposition we all had at that part of the Mass, when our prayer life was interrupted by a gentleman who walked through the back door of our chapel to speak to me right in the middle of the homily. This Hispanic visitor seemed familiar to me though I could not place him (me with my two second memory). Middle-aged and clean in appearance, this nice person did not seem any worse for wear, but obviously he seemed troubled enough to walk obliviously into our time of prayer.



Oddly enough, this visitor asked me if I was busy at that moment. “I’m kind of busy,” I told the nicely appointed Hispanic middle-aged man. “You see, right now I am in the middle of preaching my homily. I’m not sure if anyone is listening but my mouth seems to be moving and words seem to be coming out,” I said. “Is it possible that we can talk as soon as Mass is over?” Realizing that he walked right into the middle of the liturgy, the man sheepishly crawled to the back of the worship space and quietly waited until our sacrament time was over.

As is my custom on Wednesday nights, I usually hear the confessions of those who attend the Mass and our community at large, so I asked the faithful if they could be patient with me as I spent time with this visitor who wished to occupy my time. As it turned out, the faithful waited for me a half an hour before I walked into the confessional...

I brought our visitor to a side room to have a conversation with him after the liturgy. The man asked me if I remembered him from eight years previous. As most of you know, I can’t remember what I had for breakfast let alone remember a face – I feel blessed in that when I serve others that I do it because they ask, not because of their social or

religious standing. The man told me that eight years prior, I was able to help him with a serious problem in his life, where he was trying to escape a horrible situation where peer pressure and outside forces tried to lure him back into a life of horrible sin that he so desperately wanted to escape.

I guess some years ago I was able to do something for the man so that he could get his life back on track. After a period of difficulty, the man was able to find his way again, raise a family and get a job that would support the ones he loved. For the years prior to that encounter, the man was doing rather well until the business owner for whom he was working decided to retire and the man sought out other employment. He found a job up north and was coming to me to seek help getting to his new destination. As a result, I was able to find some resources to make this journey possible and the man went on his way.

A half an hour later, I returned back to the confessional, where about a dozen or so good folks patiently waited for me so they could confess their sins. It is during those moments of life that I give thanks to the

Lord for the Spirit that lives in me that makes this offer of forgiveness and Christian service possible.

This weekend, I encountered a similar experience in Elwood, IL. Some time back, a student at a previous school had quite a difficult time with the faculty and staff, as his attitude reflected the lack of God's love in his heart. Sean's father was a pillar of strength at the parish – Sean's father Mike often brought in kids to our parish from troubled neighborhoods to show them that people in the area actually cared for them and welcomed them into a safe space for basketball and fellowship.

After years of wandering, Sean finally got on track in his life, earned a welding degree and now heads up a local welder's union in Joliet. As a result, Sean was able to buy a "starter home" in Elwood. The family asked me to bless the house so that Sean could start his new life on the right track. For the hour I spent with the family, we talked about faith, our struggles in life and that no one is alone in this world as long as God and this community of believers prays and supports them in this Christian cause.

"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15: 2). How is it possible for me to preach the gospel message if I am not living it first? How is this possible for anyone to do? In this famous passage from the gospel of Luke that we have just read, the Pharisees deride our Lord because he sat and ate with those in society that seemingly are not worthy of God's mercy. If you think about it, the same could easily apply to any of us – are any of us truly worthy to receive the grace of God in our lives? What makes this faith so beautiful is that despite our Christian weakness, God offers us this gift because God has more faith in us than we often have in ourselves. All God asks of us is to turn away from sin and return back the message of the gospel (the Ash Wednesday prayer).

In the truncated story we read from today's gospel, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' derision by offering us three metaphors of forgiveness: a story about a lost coin, a story about a lost sheep and the story of the lost son, the Prodigal Son which we just heard at today's liturgy. In all three stories, Jesus offers us a message of hope that should inspire the lives we are called to live – even if we fall, God constantly seeks us out and offers

us the chance to be redeemed when we admit our sins, ask for forgiveness and allow the Lord to help us to “right the ship,” so to speak. The joy of the faith is found when we welcome those who are lost back to the fold (including ourselves), not feeling jealous about God devoting time to seek out the lost but embracing the opportunity that God offers us in joining the quest to help those who cannot find their way.

In my own faith life, I do not feel right about preaching the gospel unless I am *living* the gospel that I preach. The gospel of Luke is a most challenging one within my life because what Jesus asks us to do through Luke’s presentation is to go out and serve those *most in need of God’s mercy* (the Fatima Prayer) and extend this hand of forgiveness to those outside my comfort zone, to those with whom I do not always associate. For this reason, the ministry that God offers through me at Stateville Prison or in the nursing homes or hospitals, especially for the sake of those for whom I am not normally responsible for serving, is as important to me as for those in this community for whom I am responsible. If I cannot model the gospel message, what value is it for

me to preach this gospel message to you? Maybe this is why I felt it important to help this particular man who was once lost and is on his way to being found. Maybe this is the reason I often spend an entire day in the confessional on Gaudete and Laetare Sundays (as I try to do once each Advent and Lent) as a response to gospel passages such as the one we just heard today.

If we understand this same message, then we also understand what we are called to do for the sinners of today's age, who, like us, are trying to right a life wronged by sin. As Christians, we are obligated by love to welcome the outsider and the outcast, to do what Christ did for not just their sakes but for our own. In the world of faith, we realize that we are just as lost as everyone else if we do not follow the teachings of God. In the world of faith, we realize that by serving the other as God serves us, we model the kind of life that Christ shows us. We are compelled by this example and the example of those who have gone before us to offer this welcome to the stranger, the helpless and the person who seeks out our help, even if they choose to interrupt our homilies to ask for this

assistance (although it might be a good idea to wait until the Mass is over to seek out this help!).

For me this week, the well-appointed Hispanic visitor who interrupted the homily a few years ago could easily represent the character of the Prodigal Son in this age. We are confronted by these kinds of situations on a constant basis. May we have the prudence and wisdom to allow the Holy Spirit to flow within us so that the manner in which we respond to the cry for help may be a Christian one as we model the charism that those who have gone before us have offered those of previous generations. May we offer this gift of love to the people that we meet, always in God's name. This is our prayer.