

[Readings: Wis. 1:13-15; 2:23-24; Psalm 30; 2 Cor. 8:7, 9, 13-15; Mark 5:21-43]

Most people will go to any lengths to avoid talking about or thinking about death. We fear and dread it, and when it comes for us or for those close to us, we are angry and even more fearful. People spend billions of dollars avoiding it, delaying its effects, or trying to remain perpetually young. But as the old expression goes: the mortality rate in life is 100%. What does God say about death? Our First Reading says “God did not make death” – an odd statement, given that all things must die. God says through the inspired author of the Book of Wisdom that all creation is good. That God takes no delight in death and destruction, and that these are never God’s intentions.

So... If God made everything good, why doesn’t God just “fix” everything? The “death” spoken of here is the unnatural and avoidable kind: war, violence, starvation, disease and injustice. This “envy of the devil” is coupled with human actions rather than the reaction of a vengeful God. It’s not up to GOD to make things right -- you and I are the ones to make things right. It’s up to us to “fix” things that can be avoided or reconciled.

When we fail to bring peace, fellowship, nourishment, health and justice, it is unfair to get angry with and to blame God. Natural biological death is not a punishment but an essential element of creation. And death, when it is understood as separation from God, is met with God’s response: the gift of eternal life. Jesus Christ, Who died an unnatural and violent death, is the promise of a new life, an eternal life without sorrow or pain.

The power of God to do this is limited only by our own attitude. Faith makes healing possible. In almost all of the Gospel healings, Jesus declares that it is the faith of the individual that makes the healing possible. It seems that God can exert a positive, active healing power on our behalf, but it must be met by an open and receptive power that only we possess. God intends for us to have life and to have it abundantly. God does not afflict us with death and disease as some sort of punishment or test. Life will deal out many painful situations, but only you and I can decide how we will respond to them.

This Tuesday is my sister Kathy’s first birthday since her passing in November. I remember all the prayers that you and I offered for her healing and cure from cancer. I had problems with faith and prayer when that didn’t happen. Until I realized that I was praying for what I wanted, not what God had planned.

When it was close to the end of her life on earth, I asked if she was ready for her transition. She said, "Yes. And it will be quick and peaceful." And it was.

With whom do you most identify in today's Gospel? There are plenty of characters here who are being stung by death. There is a woman whose whole life has been caught and dominated by a terrible, life-demanding illness. There is a distraught father. A little girl whose young life is being cut short. There are the baffled disciples, the crowd who doesn't know what to think of all this. Where are you? And yet, intruding into the story is another face, the strong, life-giving face of Jesus. Mark says that Jesus was forever intruding into fixed, settled, hopeless situations and bringing life. Hear His strong voice speaking over the laments and dirges in today's Gospel. Hear Him as he calls to the little girl, "Get up!"

I think He may be calling to you and me. "Get up!" His voice is strong, commanding, and vital. "Get up!" You have perhaps heard His comforting, soft voice before, stilling the waves of the storm, bringing peace to troubled waters. Now hear His other voice, that strong, shattering, enlivening voice. Evoking "fear and trembling" (verse 33) in all who heard it that day, it may do the same for us. Life is frightening, when it intrudes into the realm of death. Hear his voice now. I think He is shouting. There is so much death. We are asleep with death so it takes a loud voice to wake us.

Negativity, fear and doubt have to give way to faith, trust and hope. We who have much of this do not need more. But perhaps our call today is to be a positive witness to those who have less. To "pay" it forward, or better still, to "pray" it forward! St. Paul is not calling us to some socialistic commune in today's Second Reading. He is asking us to meet everyone's needs equally.

Death is chaotic. Jesus Christ has come into the world to deal with the chaos of death. Jairus rejoices; the old woman tells the whole truth.

What is the whole truth? Surely, the Way, the Truth and the Life could order her chaos. In this fallen world, in this world suffering from sin and death, there's plenty of chaos. Jesus came into the world to deal with death and chaos.

And we Christians are meant to share this fact with the world. We are to go to the ends of the world, as joyful, missionary disciples, announcing the Good News that chaos will not win.

Against all odds, all our evidence, God will order the chaos. AMEN!

[Readings: Is. 57:15-19; Ps. 85; Phil. 4:6-9; John 14:23-29]

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "ssssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird's owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum cleaner, and opened the bag. There was Chippie - still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust, hair and all the stuff you find in a dust bag, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the tap, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, a friend who had heard about Chippie's troubles contacted his owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares."

Who can blame him? Sucked in, washed up, and blown over . . . That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

Things happen in our lives that come along unexpectedly and we end up feeling a bit like Chippie -- sucked in, washed up, and blown over -- the song stolen from the stoutest of hearts.

That's how we feel some days about our beloved country -- the United States of America. Over the centuries of our history, it seems like we, as a nation, have been "sucked in, washed up, and blown over." The song of freedom, the song of justice, the song of peace has been silenced.

Although Independence Day is not a religious holiday, there is a definite religious significance to the occasion. We proudly commemorate the courage of our founding fathers and mothers of our country which allowed them to be faithful

to the inspiration they received from God, and to establish a new and free nation. Our nation's ancestors were people of faith and religion. They sincerely believed that the source of our human dignity and our freedom came from God, the Creator of us all. They had an optimistic energy in the American people and in their new form of government.

It is very disappointing to see the rampant lack of faith resulting in blatantly immoral choices and lifestyles and actions which is causing our country to rot from the inside out. For our nation's founders, faith in God went well beyond a gentle hope that America would receive heavenly blessings. Their Judeo-Christian-based writings show that our early leaders held a stronger belief: God's divine will was manifested in history, and a nation that honestly sought to conform itself to the dictates of the Almighty would enjoy God's blessings.

In times of distress and struggle, they prayed for forgiveness and deliverance. They turned to God in good times and in bad. As the infant nation began, John Adams, who would become the second President of the United States, wrote on July 3, 1776 about the next day: "I believe that this day will be celebrated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be celebrated with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other."

The Catholic Church in the United States established Religious Freedom Week, which begins every year on June 22, the feast of two English martyrs who fought religious persecution -- Sts. John Fisher and St. Thomas More -- and ends June 29, the feast of two apostles martyred in Rome -- Sts. Peter and Paul.

"Serving Others in God's Love" was the theme of this year's Religious Freedom Week. U.S. Catholics were encouraged to pray and take action act in support of religious liberty at home and abroad.

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, said, "Religious freedom allows the space for people of faith to serve others in God's love in ministries like education, adoption and foster care, health care, and migration and refugee services. We encourage people of faith to reflect on the

importance of religious freedom so that we might have the space to carry out our mission of service and mercy." He also invited "everyone to pray for our brothers and sisters who face intense persecution in other parts of the world."

A USCCB news release on the observance quotes Pope Francis from his 2015 visit to the United States. In remarks to President Barack Obama Sept. 23, 2015, the pontiff said that religious freedom "remains one of America's most precious possessions." Pope Francis said, "And, as my brothers, the United States bishops, have reminded us, all are called to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it."

Separation of Church and State does NOT mean elimination of ethics and morality from our government.

Another effort which Catholics in the United States are invited to observe is the Fortnight for Freedom. The Fortnight for Freedom is a campaign initiated by the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States in 2012. Events over the course of fourteen days from June 21 to July 4 each year, call upon Catholics to participate in a pledge to religious liberty and an appeal for the inclusion of a "conscience clause" in all federal, state and local executive orders, legislation and court decisions for religious institutions and religious faithful to practice according to the moral tenets of one's religious faith. Through these and other prayers and practices, may the songs of freedom, justice and peace ring once again through our blessed land! God bless America! AMEN!

[Readings: Ezekiel 2:2-5; Psalm 123; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; Mark 6:1-6]

Our First Reading today makes me think of that time of the year in the spring when parish openings take place in the Archdiocese. Pastors are moving or retiring, Associate Pastors may be moving into their first pastorates, other priests are staying put. Last Sunday, I celebrated my fourth anniversary as your pastor, and look forward to more years of ministering and serving with you at St. Martin de Porres. (At this point, the congregation breaks into applause!)

It may be hard to believe, but some parishes in the Archdiocese are NOT on a priest's wish list. The reputation of some places is so bad that priests will not go there voluntarily. I am happy to report that TWELVE priests applied for this parish four years ago! St. Martin de Porres definitely has a positive reputation, not like those pesky Israelites that poor Ezekiel is being sent to.

Our Second Reading from Second Corinthians describes the Apostle Paul's struggle with grace and freedom. Paul was granted great revelations and insights in his teaching. He was getting a little too full of himself, calling himself the greatest of all the Apostles. He had to be brought down a notch or two. He had to learn that he wasn't as strong as he imagined himself to be. He was giving himself credit for his many talents and his zeal for the Church's mission.

So God had to give him a reality check. God gave him some reality exercises to learn his weakness, and the need for God's power over those weaknesses. He even calls that "thorn in the flesh" "an angel of Satan to beat me." What is that "thorn in the flesh" that he refers to? Take your pick; this is what I found that various authors and commentators suggest: temptation to sexual sins (that's the most common), an eye disease, epilepsy, migraines, malaria or a speech impediment.

What is the "thorn in YOUR side?" What is that humbling reality that causes you to realize your dependence not only on yourself or others, but on God Himself? Is it physical, spiritual, mental, emotional? Whatever that "thorn" is, that life or nature has given you, God's strength and hope to live with and in spite of that "thorn" makes life worth living, and makes faith worth believing.

God's words to St. Paul are the same words directed to us: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

I had a little bit of apprehension thirty years ago when I was assigned to Our Lady Queen of Apostles Parish in Hamtramck, only two miles away from the Detroit neighborhood where I was raised. I was grateful to be close enough to know some of the people there and far enough that they didn't remember me when I was in diapers! Even when I went to New Baltimore as pastor, I soon learned that ten of my Denby High School classmates were in that parish! When my sister Kathy was working at the bank, it seemed like half of the people here at St. Martin's were her customers. Because her married last name was different than mine, folks didn't know we were related. So she could give me "the skinny" on some of you folks! And it was all GOOD!

What is the "thorn" that Jesus has to deal with, not only in His own time on earth, but in our own time now in the present? Is it physical? No, that would come later when He would be handed over, made to suffer and die a horrific death. For the moment, and for us, Jesus bears for the sake of the Gospel all of our physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wounds.

Despite all the wonders and miracles He has done to this point, the people who thought they knew Jesus best have rejected Him. Offended by Him, they refuse to believe. They thought they "had His number." They did not allow Jesus to surprise them with His wisdom and power. He was amazed at their lack of faith. They were envious that someone from their home town had done so well.

In this Gospel reading, we see the painful truth of what happens when we share our faith with those who knew us before we became alive in our faith. Like Jesus, we are rejected, misunderstood, and disbelieved by people who don't understand why we changed. They feel threatened by our example; they don't want to consider their own need to change. We sound like fanatics to them, and they use this as an excuse to remain uninfluenced by our testimony.

Jesus changed after He quit living an ordinary life in an ordinary town with an ordinary job to begin a ministry that would instigate persecution, and He

invited everyone to follow his example. How crazy does that sound?

Making matters worse, He was now spending all of his time trying to change the status quo of everyone's normal life and their normal ways of relating to others and their normal attitudes about religion -- even affecting the status quo of those who did not want to follow him and become like him.

People don't like to be challenged, especially when it means giving up what's familiar and comfortable. However, this is not a reason for us to keep silent. We have been called by Christ to share the Good News about him. We must make it known that conversion is important, or else we are sinning against Him and against those who need to learn more about Him.

We fulfill this mission by sharing our personal conversion stories and our spiritual insights, and especially by making this an *invitation* rather than by *demanding* that others change. Especially with spouses and adult children. Sometimes parishioners ask me: How come my spouse or adult child isn't at the same level of spirituality that I am? And I ask them, when did YOUR conversion happen? Did anyone else force it? Was it instantaneous or gradual? Give THEM the same opportunity. In the meantime, inspire them by your example.

If you're being rejected because of believing and living out your faith publically, remember that Jesus understands how you feel. Let the sting of their rejection be replaced by an awareness that God is very pleased with you. You are becoming a joyful, missionary disciple!

In what ways has Jesus changed your life? Who are the people that misunderstand these changes? Now think of those who do understand you: What can you do to enjoy their company more often? When have you been rejected because of your spiritual growth? What have you learned about how to lovingly respond to their objections? What are your frustrations in doing this? Have you ever walked away like Jesus did when he left his hometown?

Anyone who stands for goodness and truth and who stands in solidarity with all of their brothers and sisters throughout the world cannot travel through this life unhurt. Rather, they bear the same battle scars that identify those who struggle for justice. However, they – and we – are stronger for the struggle

because we cling to that promise God made and continues to make to each of us: “My grace is sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness.” As weak, scarred and vulnerable as you and I are, God’s grace and power are always with us to sustain us in the fight, the race, the faith. And that is all the comfort that we need. AMEN!