

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

Valentine's Day – Love and the Celebration of Marriage

One of the things I love about our Church (St. Ignatius Loyola, Westlawn) is the Crucifix that hangs above the altar. It is massive and the detail is impressive but that is not what attracts me the most. The thing I love about that Crucifix is that it is the visible symbol of genuine and perfect love. It serves as a reminder of our call to love others as Christ has loved us.

On this Valentine's Day and World Marriage Day the Cross is a powerful reminder of perfect love... a love that is self-emptying and self-sacrificing. A love that we are called to give witness to in our daily lives with all those we meet.

The Class of 2021 & the Virtues, Principles and Values Project

As many of you know I teach Theology to senior's at Berks Catholic High School. I have assigned them a project where they must identify the virtues, principles and values they use in their decision-making and relationships. They must adhere to strict definitions for virtues, principles, and values they select.

Based on their initial reflections and other journal assignments I see an unusual goodness in this class – an honesty, innocence and lively faith. Perhaps it is because they lost a classmate to cancer. Perhaps it is because they have been following social distance guidelines for almost a year now. Perhaps their experience of life is that nothing is easy. Perhaps they are sick of the bickering and discord that carries on around them. Whatever the cause of that goodness, I am excited to see what they have to say with this project.

I am also cautious and skeptical. The reason for my caution is this... It is hard to teach the true meaning of virtues, principles and values when they live in a world surrounded by the idea that words can mean whatever we decide they mean. Our culture has profaned and degraded the meaning of words like love, freedom, and vocation. Instead, we have elevated words like tolerance to the status of a virtue.

Scripture & Disgust

In the Scriptures there was no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy. The sufferer of such maladies was banished from fellowship. They were required to wear rags, with a bared head, and a cover over the upper lips, and to warn others of their polluted presence with the cry, "Unclean, unclean!" The leper had not only to bear the physical pain of this disease, one also had to bear the mental anguish and the heartbreak of being totally shunned. Practically all of society saw the leper as disgusting. This is what it means to be tolerated...

Jesus and the Leper

Can you imagine Jesus merely tolerating anyone? Today's Gospel is instructive in this regard – It highlights how Jesus views one who others see as disgusting. Jesus embraces this disgusting and desperate human being with understanding and compassion... He touches a man who was considered unclean... unworthy of human comfort. But to Jesus this man was not unclean; he was simply a human soul in desperate need. Here we see compassion and genuine love in a simple touch.

St. Mother Teresa – Do something beautiful for God

St. Mother Teresa who dedicated her life to the desperate and disgusting had this insight... To sometimes experience disgust is quite natural. The virtue, which at times is of historic proportions, consists in being able to overcome disgust, for the love of Jesus. This is the secret we discover in the lives of some saints: the ability to go beyond what is merely natural. To reinforce the importance of virtue as a firm disposition to do the good St. Mother Teresa describes an experience St. Francis (Assisi) also had with a leper...

"Once, when he ran into a leper who was completely disfigured, he instinctively backed up. He immediately overcame the disgust and kissed the leper's disfigured face. The leper left praising God and Francis was filled with a tremendous joy."

In this example we see St. Francis overcome his disgust with the help of God's grace. He then immediately extends that grace to the leper who praises God. Finally, the grace St. Francis extended comes back to him in tremendous joy.

Our Vocational Call is to Holiness

I am constantly reminding my kids that regardless of the career they choose or the state in life (married, priesthood, religious or single) they see themselves called to... Their first

call is to holiness. Their second call is to help others to become holy. That call is best accomplished through deeds... By touching the lives of others in some way.

That call to holiness requires that we look to the best among us for an example of how to live our lives and how to touch the lives of others. Our culture is bankrupt here as there are very few saints we can look too. That is because we have accepted a culture that fancies itself as arbiter of what is good. We must reject the current worldview... a worldview that does not understand the true meaning of virtue. A worldview that sees goodness and holiness as anything that we decide it is.

We are called to imitate the healing compassion of Christ – to embrace the desperate soul and push past our disgust. And we can only do that when we realize that our Christian freedom is not given to us for our own sake but for the sake of others. This is the best meaning of freedom in its deepest a truest sense... it is freedom to embrace excellence... to embrace holiness.

Conclusion

This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent. It is a time for us to experience God's healing touch and to extend that healing touch to others. We are called to imitate the healing compassion of Christ outlined in the Gospel and confirmed in Paul's letter to the Corinthians...

"To confront the diseases of our brothers and sisters, to touch them, to make them our own and to take practical steps to alleviate them." (adapted from Lenten Reflection by Pope Francis 2014)

Perhaps this Lent it is also time for us embrace genuine virtue. To seek holiness in a more determined and serious way. To set our sights on only the absolute best examples of virtue and holiness... people like St. Mother Teresa, St. Ignatius, and St. Francis. And most especially our savior Jesus Christ. We are called to go beyond what is merely natural or comfortable. We are called to embrace the Cross. And to die to self for the sake of others. And we can be sure that God will support our mere human efforts with a superabundance of supernatural grace.