



The Fifth Sunday of Lent (C)
April 7, 2019
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

I am not aware of any indications in the Holy Scriptures that Jesus had a sense of humor. The overall message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not intended to be warm and fuzzy. For us today, the Good News of the Gospel is about a way to life, a life dedicated to following Jesus in the modern world. Jesus reminds us, “The poor you always have with you.” I am reminded that the Good News of Jesus exists in a world in which the poor are indeed with us.

Government statistics indicate that “46.5 million people (in the U.S.), including 1 of every 5 children, are living in poverty. That represents an increase of more than 9 million since 2008. An additional 97.3 million people are officially designated as low-income. Taken together, this means that 48% of the U.S. population... is poor or low income.” (Lindsay Trazzo at www.workingpreacher.org and <http://federalsafetynet.com/us-poverty.html>)

A year or so ago, a group of us from St. Mark’s went to Mel Trotter for a discovery lunch. Mel Trotter is a shelter very near here where some four hundred people are offered shelter every night. At the lunch, we learned that over the previous year, the number of homeless in Grand Rapids had increased by about 35%. The increase came from people outside of Grand Rapids. They had come to Grand Rapids because of the generosity of the good people who live here. That generosity includes St. Mark’s.

Our yearly operating budget enables us to do good work in the Name of God. Each year, we send contributions to numerous social service agencies, support our partnership with Degage Ministries on South Division, continue our commitment to the East Leonard Elementary School, fund the Discretionary Fund and importantly, feed some 150 of our neighbors every Sunday in our Breakfast Café Ministry. Last Sunday in the newly established quarterly Breakfast Café collection, we received over \$800 from generous hearts. Today, envelopes are on the Resource Tables if you would like to contribute to this important Parish ministry.

Jesus reminds us, “The poor you always have with you”.

A few years ago, I was in El Salvador and visited a small town in the countryside. What I learned on that trip was eye-opening. I saw extreme poverty. I heard sincere testimonies which indicated the great need for the assistance which the U. S. sends to El Salvador and other countries in Central America. Aid from the U.S. is critical. Without it, there will likely be even more poverty, even more violence, even more refugees fleeing the turmoil in countries such as El Salvador.

“The poor you always have with you.”

I find that sentence to be complex and troubling. It is a statement to keep in mind and perspective in light of Jesus and his commitment to the marginalized of his day, the poor, the sick and the needy.

Days before the Passover and the crucifixion of Jesus, the Mary's anointing of Jesus can be seen as a sign of the royal lineage of Christ, as a descendant from the House of David. It was also a sign of one who would soon be prepared for burial.

Jesus tells us that the poor will always be with us and yet is that not a clarion call for us today? Perhaps a more immediate question is how do we see the face of Jesus when we look into the faces of our neighbors on South Division, at our southern border or those we see in refugee camps on TV half way across the world.

We know that we live in a global society. That which affects others affects us. As part of God's creation, we are all sisters and brothers. We are created by the same God and as followers of Jesus are called to be as responsible as possible for the needs of others.

What does it mean to be responsible for the needs of others? What does it mean to work to be people of justice, integrity, truth and compassion? What does it mean to prepare our hearts to be one with Jesus as he moves closer to what we call 'Good Friday'? After all, it is Jesus who bore his message of love to the Cross. He sacrificed his life that we might have life. John 15:13 reminds us that "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." What does it mean to lay down one's life for the sake of others?

I fear that I and perhaps we don't always live being conscious of the needs of others. Our neighbors are those sitting next to us, yes, and those all around us whether down the street or across the globe.

Unfortunately, we seem to be living in a society in which "anything goes" and can be said, true or false. As Christians, we are not called to a higher standard than that? Parish leadership is now engaged in discussions to discern how to better live in to that higher standard. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to a higher standard which very much involves forgiveness and reconciliation. As the Beloved of God, we are called to tend one another and live into the community God would have us become.

St. Mark's Mission Statement and tag line printed every week on the cover of the bulletin call us to do what Jesus would have us do, to care for others as best we can. I believe that we are all in need of care, compassion and love. To whatever extent I have failed in being faithful to that care for others, I ask for forgiveness and an opportunity for reconciliation.

How about all of us? As individuals and as a community, are we not committed to being people of forgiveness and who seek reconciliation? With an abundance of grace available to us, Lent is the ideal season to make that happen. When we ask for forgiveness and seek reconciliation, the door for healing and wholeness is opened wide.

Through prayer and self-examination, we can know who we really are and what our motivations just might be. We can recognize that how we treat one another is vital to their health as well as our own. I am reminded of the most important dictum for the preacher, "Preacher, hear thyself". Perhaps, that applies to all Christians: "Follower of Jesus, hear thyself".

We are all called to put into practice what we profess with our lips: The Good News of Jesus Christ is "Good News". It can be a life-giving stream of freedom and joy.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are "Good News". How we are people of that 'Good News' is up to us, a challenge for which God's grace is already ours! Amen.