

March 21, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Fifth Sunday of Lent

All of a sudden, it feels like we've turned a corner, and life feels a little lighter—a little brighter—a little more optimistic.

As more people receive the life-saving vaccines, as restrictions that we've all been under for more than a year now begin to be relaxed, and as there's a greater sense of confidence that we might be soon ready to say that this pandemic is at least under control---that might be part of the reason why there might be a more positive mood prevailing these days. Of course we must continue to take precautions, and follow the health guidelines in place for the sake of everyone, but---that proverbial light at the end of the tunnel seems to be shining brighter.

Besides that, "March Madness" is back----I have no idea who's playing, nor do I fill out any brackets, and I really don't have that much interest in Basketball---but it's nice to hear people being excited and having something to cheer about, and to see that 101-year old Sister Jean is still attending the Loyola Team as their Chaplain.

And finally---and for me most importantly---today is the first full day of Spring---the dark doldrum days of winter have passed and the days of increasing light and Nature's new life are underway. I celebrated yesterday by visiting one of our local Nurseries where I bought a miniature daffodil plant and a small purple hyacinth, which for me, are the official indicators that Spring is here. In these days, Nature starts to wake up---little flowers will soon start to spout from the ground---and trees will begin to bud. For those who like to plant gardens and flowers, it will soon be time to sow the seeds. It's not time yet---it's only time to get ready---to prepare the ground, and to gather supplies; but soon, it will be the right time.

Jesus talked a lot about when the "right time" was for Him as well; He called it His "Hour". There were many times in the Gospel accounts that we heard Jesus say that He couldn't do something because it wasn't the "right time"---He wasn't ready. We all remember when He and His Mother Mary were invited to a Wedding Feast in Cana and the Wedding reception ran out of wine. Mary came to Jesus to ask Him to do something about it, and Jesus' answer was: "*My hour has not yet come.*" But today, we just heard Jesus say: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" And then He went on to talk about planting "grains of wheat". Since it was Spring time then as all, that's probably why Jesus used that image: "*Unless a grain of*

wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

There is something inside each seed that can only reach its full potential if the seed is buried in the earth and dies; only then can it give life to the fruit or flower inside it. So, Jesus is saying, there is something inside each of us that can only come to life if we spiritually ‘*die to ourselves*’.

Earlier in today’s Gospel passage, St. John told us about “*some Greeks who had come to worship at the Passover Feast*”. They had obviously heard about Jesus and they wanted to meet Him. So they came to Philip, who went to Andrew, and then they were brought to Jesus. That’s what we have to do too. If we want to realize the full potential that lies within us, we have to do what those Greeks did---to go out of our way “*to see Jesus*”. And even more than that, we have to also be open to come to know Him, love Him, and serve Him by following Him. I hope that’s what all of us have been working on during this Lent. I hope that, through our prayer, fasting, and self-denial, we have come to a deeper relationship with Jesus in our lives; a greater understanding of the Good News of Jesus; a more realistic understanding of who we are as someone baptized and living in union with Christ and His Church.

In today’s First Reading, the Prophet Jeremiah, revealed that the Lord said that He intended to “*make a new covenant with the House of Israel*”. The Covenant wouldn’t be new; God’s Promise remained the same and the people would still be required to abide by His Law as a sign of His Love for them. What would be “new” was the way God intended to communicate His covenant and His Law of Love. The original “covenant” was written on two stone tablets that people had to read and memorize. It was something, in a sense, outside themselves. In this “new covenant”, God intended to “*place His law within them and write it upon their hearts.*” And God wanted to do that for a purpose; so that: “*I will be their God, and they shall be My people....All from least to greatest shall know Me, says the Lord.*”

Our Catholic Faith assures us that is exactly what happens to us on the day of our Baptism. When we are baptized into Christ, God “indelibly” marks us as His own, and He gives us His Holy Spirit to live within us forever. Of course, God also gives us the gift of free will, so He doesn’t force us to love Him in return---that is always our choice. But God’s Love is “planted”, like a grain of wheat, in our souls. And the only way for that “seed of God’s Life” to “come alive”, or reach its full potential---to bear fruit---is if we choose to give it life by “dying to our sinful selves” so that God’s life can more room to live within us.

Now, that's not an easy thing to do. In fact, our human nature resists that choice to be obedient to God's Will and live according to God's Law. It wasn't an easy choice for Jesus either. We heard Jesus, in today's Gospel, truly bare-ing His soul. Right after He said that His "hour"---His time to die---had now come, He said: *"I am troubled now, yet what should I say: 'Father, save Me from this hour?' But it was for this very purpose that I came to this hour."* Jesus is clearly telling us that facing this moment was not easy.

We heard the same thing in today's Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews which told us that Jesus really struggled: *"Jesus offered prayers...with loud cries and tears to the One Who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard..."* But even though Jesus prayed with loud cries and tears, and He was "troubled" and struggled whether or not He should ask His Father to "save Him from this 'Hour'", Jesus remained faithful and obedient, which led Him to say to His Father: *"Father, glorify Your Name."* The Father "heard" all of this----Jesus' troubled heart; His loud cries and tears; as well as His readiness to accept His Hour. In fact, as the Gospel tells us, the Father's Voice spoke from Heaven, saying: *"I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."* In other words, the Father was confirming that there was no other way; Jesus needed to complete His mission of winning our Salvation thru His suffering, death and resurrection.

As the Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews put it: *"Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered; and when He was made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him."* That line is a hard one to grasp---the idea that Jesus, the Son of God, had to learn "obedience"; and the way He had to learn it, was by suffering.

I remember as a child, disobedience was always on my list of sins to confess when I went to monthly Confession----I disobeyed my parents; I disobeyed my teachers; I disobeyed whoever was in authority over me. But "obedience" is much more than a virtue for children to practice. In fact, it may be the most important of all the virtues for all mature followers of Jesus to master. I mean, if Jesus---the Son of God---struggled to learn "obedience", what about us? Are we even aware that we need to learn it?

Obedience is another word for our willingness to live our lives according to God's Will. So really, when we come right down to it, every sin we commit is also a sin of disobedience. If we choose to pursue my will over God's will---that's disobedience. The particular sins any of us commit fall into the category of any of the 10 Commandments, the Great Commandment of Love of God and Neighbor, or a disregard for the Beatitudes or other Gospel values Jesus

teaches. But whatever particular Commandment or Value we sin against, there's also an element of disobedience---refusing to follow God's will.

So, how do we learn "obedience"? How do we learn to come to realize that God knows best, and what I think is good for me is usually not the case if it contradicts God's will. The only way to do that is the same way Jesus learned it---thru "suffering"; thru "dying to self" so that we can "rise to live in God's ways".

The very word "obedience" comes from the Latin, "obediere"---to listen. Jesus "listened" to His Father. So, "active listening" is the key to the virtue of obedience". Though Jesus was "troubled", and made "loud cries and shed tears" to His Father about "His Hour", as He would do even in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He would die as He prayed that "this Cup might be spared from His having to drink it---but not His Will, but Thy Will be done"—in spite of those struggles, Jesus listened, and was obedient to the Father's Will for the sake of our Salvation.

If it was difficult for Jesus, we'd be foolish to think that it's not going to be difficult for us. To obediently follow Jesus----to live our lives by Gospel values---to do what's right even if everyone else around us is doing something different---to defend and respect human life---to stand up for what is right and just; none of that is easy; to do any of those things requires a willingness to die to ourselves, so that we can obey Jesus. The Sacraments are essential to help us in our ways of spiritually dying to ourselves. That applies in a special way to the Sacrament of Penance where we can experience the Mercy and Forgiveness of Jesus as we confess our sins to the priest. Making a good Lenten confession, or a Confession anytime, is so important to help us become stronger and mature followers of Jesus.

We're only one week away from the holiest week of the year. Holy Week reminds us how deeply Jesus loves each and every one of us. Two weeks from today is Easter Sunday when we will be rejoicing because Jesus has destroyed the ultimate Evils that are against the human race: Sin and Death; Jesus has conquered both by His Death and His Resurrection. Easter is our Cause for Joy and Hope because Easter is our Victory too!

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, just as Jesus willingly came into the world for the very purpose of "being glorified" when His "hour" came (which meant His suffering, death and resurrection), and yet He was "troubled" when His Hour arrived, so too do we live our lives in

this world with the realization that comes from Faith that our final Home is beyond this world--- that we will live with God forever in Heaven.

The remaining two weeks of Lent are critically important, to help all of us be ready for whenever it is that our particular "hour" might arrive. Let us join our hearts and minds to that of Jesus Himself. May we learn through our own suffering, as Jesus learned thru His, to be actively and courageously obedient to the Will of God, and to pray for that willingness of spirit to die to ourselves, so that we may bear much fruit and come to New Life in Christ.

God bless you!