

FROM THE PASTOR'S



24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 17, 2006 B

FAITH WITHOUT GOOD WORKS IS DEAD

Today we listened to the third of five passages from the letter of James. This passage is his famous piece about the connection between faith and good works. Even though we are saved by faith and *not* good works, James is very clear that a faith that doesn't express itself in good works is dead.

Dealing with the Crosses of Life

In a previous column, I said that some scholars look upon the section of Mark that we are presently listening to as *Lessons on True Discipleship*. This week's lesson has to do with carrying one's crosses. Jesus us that a true disciple must be willing to take up his cross and follow him.

If the Messiah must suffer, so must those who choose to follow him. As we know the cross can come to us in many shapes and forms—on a mental, emotional, physical, spiritual and social level.

Mental Suffering: There are so many people who suffer from the curse of mental illness and depression—so many who suffer silently. And now we have the large numbers of people who suffer from Alzheimer's, what some people have called the 'long goodbye'. Any one Sunday in church you may be sitting beside a person suffering from depression. **Emotionally** people suffer when their relationships are troubled. Many, many people live in emotionally abusive relationships. Others suffer emotionally because of some loss in their lives. Our emotions are impacted when we are not feeling well physically or spiritually. Many, many people in our parish have some form of **physical suffering**. Just think about the people who day in and day out are confined to beds of pain, people who are still in the work place working with severe back pain or try to cope with a migraine headache. The **aging process**, not feeling as well as we use to and being as active as we use to, can be a big cross.

Social Pain: I think of the many people of *all* ages who have lots of acquaintances but no real friends. This is a huge issue today for all age levels.

Spiritual Suffering: We experience spiritual suffering whenever we think or feel that God has abandoned us or when we pray and we do not feel God's presence but his absence. For *14 years*, St. Teresa of Avila experienced spiritual dryness in prayer. Can you imagine going into the chapel day after day only to feel *nothing* spiritually. But, she persisted in the process and God purified St. Teresa. It has been said that God permits us dryness in prayer so that we may be purified of any tendencies we

have to seek after the *experiences* of our God more than the *God* of our experiences. It's easy to pray (and be with people) when we experience "warm fuzzies". It is quite a different thing to keep a relationship going when we feel nothing. Another form of spiritual suffering is the *loss of meaning*, the "What's it all about" feeling.

Persecution: When Jesus spoke about carrying the cross he was speaking *primarily* about the suffering one may experience simply because one was his follower. In the Early church, people were beaten, stoned, thrown to the lions and killed because they believed Christ. Today, in other parts of the world, people suffer because they have chosen to follow Christ. In our country, some individuals suffer when they refuse to go along with unchristian business practices or when they join the Catholic Church after being raised in a strong Christian home and church in which anti-Catholicism was alive and well.

Help from the Serenity Prayer

When it comes to coping with suffering and pain and carrying ones cross, I feel best guided by the portion of the *Serenity Prayer* which says:

*Lord, help me to accept the things I cannot change,
to change the things I can
and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.*

"Change What Can Be Changed"

Sometimes precious little can be changed. But one thing that can *always* be changed is our *attitude* towards the circumstances of our lives. As someone once said: "It is not the circumstances of our lives that will destroy us but our *attitude* towards the circumstances of our lives." I am sure all of us have met two people who have had pretty much the same set of circumstances, but the *big difference* between both was their *attitude*. One constantly looked at the cup that was half empty, the other at the cup that was half full. One seemed to be always looking at the dark side of life, the other at the bright side. One was a constant grumbler, the other a grateful person for life's small blessings. So *attitude* is HUGE. One thing that could help us change our attitude is reading inspirational books of how *ordinary* people coped in very difficult situations e.g. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* stories.

The second thing that can often help big time is the simple act of reaching out for help. Kim Doyle (the parishioner who's email to me was in my column a couple of weeks ago) could have chosen not to tell me about her cancer or said 'no' to my offer to introduce her to the parish community to seek prayer. But instead she *choose* to reach

out and ask for spiritual and emotional support. As a result she has been greatly blessed.

Just think of all the people who *choose* not to reach out and as a result they miss out on who knows what. Too often pride gets in our way. Two weeks ago I wrote about the importance of humility in our relationship with God and others. When humility is active in our lives it enables us to move past pride. I think of all the married couples whose marriage flounders or dies because one or both are too proud to seek help. At different times in my life, I have gone for counseling and found it most helpful. Jesus' call to carry our cross *never* implies that we shouldn't do everything we can to change what can be changed.

“Accept What Cannot Be Changed”

Learning to accept and live with our present reality is indeed an important dimension of joyful living. Nothing steals our joy as easily as refusing to accept what cannot be changed *now*. Perhaps something can be changed in the future but not now. Therefore I must work hard at embracing my *present* reality. A part of accepting our present reality, is accepting our imperfections and imperfections of those who live and work with us or our fellow parishioners.

Many, many years ago I heard a talk by a Jesuit priest. He said three things:

- Every one of us are at some *Point A* in our lives. We are at a Point A in relationship to ourselves, others and God.
- Then he said that much of the *frustration, anger and depression* in life is caused by our refusal to accept our *Point A* or other people's *Point A*. Sure we all would like to be perfect or close to perfect and frequently we would like the people we live and work with to be also a lot more perfect. But they are not and we are not. Learning to live with our own imperfections and the imperfections of others is a big key to a happier life. Working towards such acceptance does *not* mean that we don't work on improving our *own* performance and *praying* for the ongoing conversion of those we must live and work with.
- When we learn to embrace our present *Point A*, then perhaps movement toward a *Point B* is possible. I have often seen this happen in relationships. When a spouse begins to feel that he/she is totally accepted at a particular *Point A*, they are freed to *move* forward to *Point B*.

Nothing brings us to our knees more than the challenge to embrace what cannot be changed e.g. a loss of some kind. This is our agony in the garden. This is our cup of suffering that we are called to drink. Accepting that a spouse has died or that a marriage is over etc., can be most

difficult. It may demand a lot of sweat, tears, counseling and yelling at God. But, it must be done if we want *peace* and *joy* to be restored to our lives.

“And the Wisdom to Know the Difference”

Sometimes we accept a reality too quickly. If Kim Doyle had to go along with the first doctor she went to, she might be dead by now. Sometimes we may think or the people around us may think that nothing can change our particular *Point A*. As a result we all too quickly accept what we shouldn't accept at least initially. On the other hand I have seen people refuse to accept what truly cannot be changed e.g. that a loved one is actively dying. It is one thing to fight as long as there is a ray of hope, it is another thing to remain in denial of an impending death when absolutely nothing can be done other than keep the person comfortable. So yes, we do also need to pray to know the difference.

Let us often pray for people carrying a big cross and to be a Simon or Veronica to them when we can. In this way we will be allowing our faith to express itself in good works.

THE WEAVER

My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly
shall God enroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver's skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.

Reflection Questions

- If carrying a cross at this time, how are you coping? Are you actively trying to change what can be changed? How open are you to seeking help? To what extent are you accepting what cannot be changed at least *now* or maybe never?
- Are the crosses in your life making you better or bitter?

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran