

Holy Thursday: April 9, 2020

While we hear the story of the Institution of the Eucharist every time Mass is celebrated, it's only at this Mass of the Lord's Supper that we hear the gospel passage that makes the explicit connection between our celebration of this sacrament and the call to serve one another as Jesus serves his disciples. Most of the time we can go forth from our Holy Thursday Mass and engage in that service in a myriad of ways.

Like so much about our current situation, what we can do today in response to Jesus' call to serve others is severely limited. Even though I have spoken of the many ways that people have been helping each other in our current crisis, the simple fact of the matter is that for most of us, it is not possible to reach out to others in the way we would most like to; in the way that best fits the gifts and talents that God has given us. Like pretty much every other priest in the world, I find this especially true for myself: I cannot serve our parishioners in most of the ways that pastors would. That is especially true for me when it comes to the fact that I cannot celebrate these most sacred liturgies of the church year gathered with our faith community in this church.

I also, realize, however, that many of you are even more limited than I am. For many of you, because of your age or your vulnerability, or perhaps for some other reason, you cannot even help others in the way that someone like me can, no matter how limited that may be. Others of you may be in touch with people who are suffering greatly through this crisis, perhaps due to the mental stress of prolonged isolation, and it seems that nothing anyone can do can help them.

The challenge, I guess today, is how do we serve when we cannot serve? It may sound like a very odd question, but it's one I have been thinking about a great deal as I have looked into my own heart and as I have heard the stories of other people. As I reflected, I was reminded of a sonnet by John Milton, the "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" poet, called, "On His Blindness".

It begins with the very simple line: “When I considered how my light is spent” and speaks of his despair at the fact that he can no longer record his poetry in his own hand because he has become blind. There is a sense of bitterness in the 14 lines of the sonnet—How could God give him this talent and then deprive him, as he sees it, of its use?

However, as he moves through the poem, we see the poet coming to terms with the new reality. Firstly, he realizes that God does not ask us to do the truly impossible: “Doth God exact day labour, light denied?” And by the end he recognizes that, even in this situation, he can serve, just not in any way he would have thought of before: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

I find that the combination of today’s gospel reading, our current situation and this poem put before us both a challenge and an encouragement.

The challenge, for people like myself who can still reach out to others, is to continue to do that with commitment, diligence and perseverance in ways that respect the limits that are necessary to stop the spread of the virus—especially with staying at home and practicing social distancing when we go out for essential tasks. It may take a lot of creativity, but we’ve seen a great deal of that already. As followers of Jesus we are encouraged to seize the opportunities to serve, even in ways we never would have thought possible before.

But what about people for whom it is truly impossible to help others. When I think about that question, I find myself thinking of my own tendency in such situations. When I cannot truly help someone, even in my ordinary ministry, it’s easy to go two places within myself.

The first is to kind of beat myself up for all the times when I feel I could or should have helped and didn’t. The trouble is that in many of those situations there were very good and pressing reasons for that choice. Sometimes it was because I had other responsibilities to take care of, sometimes it was because the person wanted to dictate how I helped

them or, sometimes, it was because no matter what I did it wouldn't have worked because the person could not see or recognize that there were steps they needed to take themselves. However, in spite of my brain telling me about those good reasons, it's very easy to second guess myself in hindsight with the "shoulda, coulda, woulda" thoughts. I can only guess how often Milton looked back on his life before blindness and wished he'd spent more time writing—in spite of the fact that he was (and remains) one of the most prolific poets of the English language.

The second thing I can find myself doing sometimes happens by itself and sometimes follows from the first. It is a turning-down or even turning-off of the desire to help people when I truly cannot help them. In some ways I think this is the most insidious. When the circumstances of our lives, out of control as they are now, tempt us to turn inward on ourselves, the forces that would turn us away from God, others and our true selves really begin to gain the upper hand.

I've found over the last few weeks that I really need to nurture my desire to serve and to help others. I do this so that the fact I cannot serve as I have been called to as both a follower of Jesus and as priest doesn't begin to atrophy. I do this firstly through prayer—through directly and honestly asking God to keep renewing that desire to serve within me. I do it by reading the scriptures, especially the parts that remind us of how it is God who works through us when we serve, and that Jesus gave his greatest service to us in his moment of greatest apparent helplessness. I also do this by trying to call to mind, in a deliberate and focused way, all those situations in which I cannot now serve and also those people, including all of you who are watching and listening right now, whom I cannot reach as I would normally do. And then I hold myself and them up to God, asking that God help each of us. That God help us to endure and to come out of the end of this crisis with our physical, mental and spiritual health intact.

That the same Jesus who feeds us with his word and with our connection to his mystical Body the church in such strange ways as livestreaming, and who calls us to imitate him in service to one another, will give those who can the strength and determination to serve.

And that he will give those who truly cannot serve and help other people or a specific other person all the grace and strength to not go down the rabbit hole of useless self-recrimination for times in the past when they also really couldn't help someone, as well the grace and strength they need to continue nurturing that desire to serve so that it does not atrophy.

Today, we hear again the words of Jesus about service to one another after he washed his disciples' feet:

I have given you a model to follow,
so that as I have done for you, you should also do.

And those of us who can serve others are called to recommit ourselves to that service in spite of the ways in which this crisis limits us.

And for those who find they either truly cannot help others because of their own situation, or who have one specific person they cannot help because of that person's circumstances in this crisis, I remind you of the words with which Milton concludes his sonnet:

They also serve who only stand and wait.

But there's even more to it than that. We're not just dealing with the loss of a physical sense that we relied on to exercise our talents. We are imprisoned in a shared reality that has profoundly shattered our world and that constantly shrouds us in uncertainty about the future and causes us to feel fear and anxiety.

Listen now, please, to the words of the late Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan reflecting on his time in solitary confinement under the Vietnamese Communist regime. I think these are words we can all take to heart today:

All prisoners, myself included, constantly wait to be let go. I decided then and there that my captivity would not be merely a time of resignation but a turning point in my life. I decided I would not wait. I would live the present moment and fill it with love. For if I wait, the things I wait for will never happen. The only thing that I can be sure of is that I am going to die.

No, I will not spend time waiting. I will live the present moment and fill it with love.