

Feb. 18-19, 2017

Thoughts from the pastor,

Whenever I leave for a little while it seems to create ripples that are much bigger. I know it is the joy of being pastor. My years as a priest before I was a pastor were not like that. Leaving didn't create much of an effect. I know that this was because the pastor just juggled a few more things when necessary. It is all a part of God's plan and at this point His plan involves me being responsible for a lot more things at once.

The biggest thing that I learned is that if I just go with God's prompting and learn what I can from His directions. Like the days off that I just had. It was a lot like something that my brother has started to say occasionally. When someone greets him with "Have a nice day!" He will respond with, "Sorry, I have other plans." It does make for some interesting expressions on people's faces. As I headed south for a few days off, God had some plans of His own. The day I arrived in Biloxi I had a nice meal. That was the last food I had for three days. I was blessed with some kind of virus that gave me fever, chills, and froze my digestive track. I knew that taking long walks on the beach and reading were not going to be the pattern of my vacation.

It did not shock me one bit that this would happen. There are so many people in this parish that are in need of prayer right now that it never dawned on me to ask why this was happening. I just presumed that God was asking me to fast and pray for some of the people I know who are hurting. For I am well aware that the work of a pastor is not just to conduct business for the parish. We are the spiritual Fathers for the parish family. Maybe I don't mention it enough but part of what a spiritual leader should be doing is interceding for their charges. This is what Jesus did for us and what He asks us to do for each other.

I've never been very good at regular fasting but I do the basics that the church asks. Ash Wednesday is coming up in a week and a half so we are asked to push a little more on the accelerator for this fasting and abstinence. My guess was that God needed even more from me than usual so that is what He set up. It was not pleasant like vacations can be. I had that kind of vacation last fall. This week off was more of an educational experience. I trust that the Lord will make the most of what He had me go through.

Last weekend's passage from the Sermon on the Mount was a long one. It also seems very harsh in our current culture. Jesus used two of the Ten Commandments to help make His point as He tries to transform our thinking. He changed "Thou shall not kill" to you are in big trouble if you just get angry with your brother. He changed "Thou shall not commit adultery" to don't even think it or you will go to hell. His version was much longer. (Matt.5:17-37)

If we are going to fit into heavenly bliss we are not going to be able to have the kind of thin skins that we are showing at this time. Every little thing irritates us. Our feelings get hurt so easy we don't even know what is making us angry anymore. We seem to have turned this teaching totally around. Jesus told us not to get angry with our brother or we would go to hell. We tell our brother that they had better not get angry with us or there will be hell to pay. That is not the same thing. We don't get to be God. Jesus can give commandments. We can't. He is trying to transform us. He practiced what He preached. We want to transform our brothers and we don't always practice what we preach. Jesus is trying to get us to heaven. I suppose we could say we

are trying to get our brother to heaven. But since we don't practice what we preach we may get them to heaven but we won't get there ourselves. In the same way we don't want anyone to cheat on us but our thoughts go wandering around like crazy in this sexually saturated world.

One of the biggest lessons that I had to learn in my life was whether God was smarter than me or not. This sounds silly to me at this point in my life but it was certainly not an easy lesson to learn. How many times have you found yourself thinking that you know a far better way of doing things than what God has as His plan? Just in these two areas of violence and sex that Jesus is working on in this section, we can find many lessons. How many times have each of us had what we call "justifiable anger?" In other words, I don't care what God thinks, this person deserves a good thrashing. Or how dare God think that I need to control my passions. If He didn't want me to have these thoughts He shouldn't have given these emotions to me. Why can't I just love the one I am with?

We must ask ourselves why God would make these rules. Can we believe that God has these rules for our own sake or does He just make these rules to drive us crazy? I mentioned that it took me a while to figure this out. Part of it was my own childishness. As a kid I was typically self-centered. I wanted my way. I didn't care that much about what things might be hurtful to others. As I had more life experience and got hurt a bunch, I learned just how painful the consequences of my actions could be to others, and how painfully they could hurt me. When looking at this section of the Sermon on the Mount we must come at it from that perspective.

This week's section on loving our enemies can only be learned after the lesson of understanding how painfully we can hurt others. This week's lesson is about going another step. It is not just keeping from hurting others, but going out of our way to make up for some of the hurt that we didn't even cause.

Stay tuned. There is much more to the Sermon on the Mount but only one week before we take a break from it, in order to work on aspects of it during the Season of Lent.

God bless you,
Fr. Frank