

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 16, 2025

As you know, the battle with COVID-19 was just that a battle. And this battle was fought not in short bursts, but in one, long, drawn-out campaign. It just went on and on and on with seemingly no end in sight. Maybe “war” isn’t too strong a word after all. It was just that costly and exhausting and heart-breaking.

And the principal “engagement” of this war was a physical one, the race to save as many of the sick as possible, the race to prevent the spread of the virus, the race to find a vaccine, and the race to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. The “enemy” was another organism, on the surface, one that we probably thought had no chance against us, yet, in reality, was “winning” for most of the fight. Yes, this battle was a battle fought for physical dominance, two created beings showing us the complexity and competitive nature of the natural world.

But, as you know, this battle was not only a battle of biological forces, a battle of one organism attacking another and the other fighting back as best it could. No, this battle was also an emotional one, one that didn’t simply tax our bodies, but taxed our spirits and minds as well.

As the months piled up, one on top of the other, many of us started suffering not from the effects of the virus itself, but from the consequences of the extended isolation. And it wasn’t simply boredom, although that was part of it. No, this was more than that. Many of us probably wondered if we would come out of it wholly unharmed, the same person we were before. It may be some years before we know the answer to that question.

Yet, not everyone experienced the isolation and the restrictions and the social distancing in quite the same way. Some were devastated by it. Some were bruised by it. Some were saddened by it. Some were annoyed by it. And some of us actually “thrived” in it. Now, of course

we'll never know with certainty why one person did well emotionally and spiritually during the pandemic, why another person did so-so, and why someone else did poorly. I think this is not a "one-answer-fits-all" situation.

But in my estimation, as I look back and reflect on those months of physical separation, I do see a kind of "pattern" that emerged among the people I know, the people I was in contact with, the people whose paths I crossed. You see, as far as I can tell, the people who did the "best" were the ones who found ways to do things for others during those lonely months.

People who reached out to others they didn't know and those they hadn't talked to in years.

People who found creative ways to use technology to bring joy into the homes of others.

People who worked on crafts and projects in their homes and then shared the fruits of those projects with those around them.

People who volunteered to help in any way they could, at churches and food distribution centers and vaccination sites.

People who arranged for events and activities to brighten someone else's day, drive-by birthdays, and socially-distanced Christmas carols, and musical performances from balconies, and care packages dropped off on porches, like a secret Santa!

These were the men and women who truly seemed to do the best during some pretty awful times, people who made sure they didn't spend the time they had simply worrying about themselves, simply killing time waiting for the fog to lift. These were people who looked for opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others.

And if I had to bet, I'd guess that these were the kinds of people who never thought to race to the store and start hoarding the stuff as so many did, toilet paper, and disinfectants, and food. For them, doing for others brought them a certain kind of happiness, a certain kind of joy, a certain kind of mental, spiritual and emotional well-being. Imagine that.

We just heard from Luke's Gospel what is commonly referred to as The Sermon on the Plain. It's similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but Luke adds a series of "woes" which he uses to contrast with his list of what makes someone "blessed". And if we look closely at the two lists, one thing seems to really jump out, especially given what I just talked about.

You see, the things that bring about true blessedness are things that are often (but not exclusively) consequences of doing for others. If we are poor because we gave from our excess, we are blessed. If we are hungry because we made sure someone else wasn't, we are blessed. If we are weeping because we empathized with the pain of another, we are blessed. And if we are hated simply for doing the right thing, we are blessed. Put simply, this list can be seen as reminding us that blessedness comes with other-centeredness.

And on the flip-side, the things that bring about "woe" are things that we often (but not always) incur by being self-centered, by looking out for ourselves first, by turning inward.

If we are filled because we always strive to meet our own needs first, well God warns us against that. If we are "laughing" because we really never share in the pain of others, well God warns us against that. And if every single person speaks well of us because we don't really stand for anything (wanting to simply be "liked"), well God warns us against that too.

Put simply, this list can be seen as reminding us that trouble and sorrow follow self-centeredness.

Which do we want to be? Which are we willing to be? Who does God want us to be?

The answer we give and live out will almost certainly determine how well we weather the storms of life, just as it determined how well we adjusted (or didn't adjust) to the events of the last couple of years.

My dear friends, let's choose to embrace the blessedness offered by God, a blessedness that doesn't come from turning inward, but from turning outward, not from having a "bunker" mentality, but from being "on the offensive" that is, by stepping out and looking for ways to bring a little help and joy and kindness to someone else.

We might be surprised by what that does, not just for them, but for us too.

Short Story

Once the train ticket inspector entered a crowded compartment and there he found an old worn-out wallet. He searched for the identity of the person and found nothing except the picture of Jesus in it. He asked the people there and an elderly person said that it was his. The inspector asked him to prove and he replied saying that it had the picture of Jesus. The inspector said that anyone could have it but could he explain? The senior man said that it was a gift from his father and he kept his parent's pictures because they were great. Later he placed his own photo thinking he was handsome. Soon his girlfriend took that place, and later his wife, and finally his son.

His parents and his wife passed away, his friends left him and his son went his own way. What was left for him was only Jesus. He had little money but Jesus was his companion. All in the compartment heard him in silence. At the next station, the Inspector got down and went to the book store to get a picture of Jesus to be kept in his wallet.

