6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B, 2.11.18
Leviticus 13:1-2,45-46/1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1/
Mark 1:40-45

Making “No Man’s Land”
our “Port of Entry”

It’s nice to be back with you after being away for a couple weeks. My travels took me to Mexico City for three days and then onto Merida in the Yucatan Peninsula for eight days. I bring greetings from Merida and the Maya Missions, where Fr. Bill Auth, a fellow Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, has been serving for the past three decades. Bill has visited our parish and me for twenty years and when he suggested that it was my turn to return the favor and go to Mexico, I was happy to comply. The trip was really a cultural immersion. The experience of the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City and the Mayan ruins in the Yucatan opened my eyes to the vastness and richness of Mexico’s history. So many ancient Mexican cultures that even rival the architecture, mathematics, art and knowledge of the Greco-Roman world of antiquity.

The highlights of the trip were the tours of a couple of the more notable Maya ruins – Dzibilchaltun and Uxmal, and the ordination to the priesthood of the first Maya Mexican Oblate, Erik Jorge, who grew up in the Maya villages and whose vocation to the Oblates and to ordained ministry was inspired by Fr. Bill. I was very proud to have Bill take us to the villages where your financial support has helped to establish learning centers for children and provide scholarships so that Mayan youth could go on to college and higher education. Bill’s ministry has taken him to places where few others have gone to minister to the poor of that area.

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Yesterday I ran into a friend of mine who had a terrible accident with an electric saw he was using in his garage, severely slashing his hand. He showed me the cut and the stitches where the doctor worked intensely to save his fingers and restore movement to them. He pointed to one area of his hand which the doctor told him is called “no man’s land.” It’s the site of the primary flexor tendon that allows us to move our fingers. Steve’s was terribly damaged; some doctors won’t try any procedure there because of the precarious location. Steve’s doctor told him that he chose to be aggressive and enter that “no man’s land.” My prayer for Steve is that through the surgeon’s skill and God’s healing grace he will have a full and complete recovery.
As I re-read today’s gospel about the encounter between Jesus and the leper, that phrase “no man’s land” suddenly took on a new meaning. Isn’t that exactly the state of the leper in Mark’s gospel? The leper was completely cut off – he was a physical, social, spiritual and moral outcast. He was relegated to a space away from others, forbidden from having human contact, unable to join in the worship of the community, and considered morally reprehensible since illness was often seen as punishment from God for some wrongdoing or sin on the leper’s part. We see Jesus breaking through the boundaries as he reaches out to touch the leper and restore him to health. Our Lord enters the leper’s “no man’s land” and brings him back to community, to worship, to wholeness and to happiness. Notice the twist which Mark employs to conclude the story: Now it is Jesus who is in the deserted places, even as the man is restored to his place in community. Jesus switches places with the leper to give him the fullness of life.

Did you know that, as part of their sacramental preparation for Confirmation, our high school candidates spend time at St. Anthony’s Soup Kitchen in San Francisco’s Tenderloin District, feeding the homeless and needy? They enter into a “no man’s land” and discover that we don’t have to avert our eyes when we see a homeless person on the street. They learn to look beyond external appearance and see each person as a beloved child of God -- a fellow human being on this road of life.

So, where is the “no man’s land” to which the Lord is calling you? That place you would rather avoid and yet is begging for your presence -- your reaching out? This Lent, rather than giving up chocolate or wine or movies, why not try a more challenging and meaningful discipline and consider entering into “no man’s land.” That place may be your own heart and a personal struggle you’ve been resisting; a relationship that has gone sour and needs repair? a situation at home or at work that requires an extra dose of courage on your part so you can confront it?

While I was away there were two events that I’m sorry I missed here at church – one, an occasion of joy and another of profound sadness. From all the reports I heard, both were powerful moments of prayer and community. Two weeks ago the annual Catholic Schools Week liturgy was filled with parents and students, faculty and alumni. Last week was a Memorial service for Bryan Vierengel, the twenty-seven year old son of Mark and Maureen, who died after two weeks in ICU. That liturgy, too, was filled with family and friends who knew and loved Bryan and his family. Both services were celebrated with a church packed with people. An amazing spirit graced both, whether in joy or in
sorrow – community, compassion, faith, support, togetherness. What I would have asked of both assemblies is: Why don’t you come more often? Why is it only on special or unique occasions that we pack the pews? Each Sunday we have the opportunity and privilege to hear the words of comfort and challenge in the scriptures; to share the very life of Jesus in the Eucharist; to be transformed from a gathering of individuals into the very Body of Christ so we can become his loving and healing presence in the world.

What if our Lenten practice this year included an act of Evangelization – of inviting a neighbor, a spouse, a co-worker, a son or daughter to join us for Mass? If each parishioner, just once during the forty days of Lent, extended an invitation to someone to come to the Lord and to join us for worship, hundreds of people would not be able to say: Well, no one ever asked me? This is an invitation – not to intrude or embarrass or interfere with someone else’s life, but to call them into the circle of Jesus’ friendship and love, the same circle that encompasses us each week as we gather for the Eucharist.

John Kasper, OSFS