July 14, 2019: Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A couple of weeks ago I was having a conversation with my brother Kevin, who was diagnosed with bladder cancer back in March. He had surgery in April right after Easter and now he is dealing with the follow-up treatment. I phoned him after I saw a post he made on Facebook, asking “Is there any such thing as a good cancer?” I asked him, “How are you doing?” At first he said, “fine.” (which, honestly, is a typical response in my family to anything that might be happening) So I said, “I don’t think so, based on your post. What is that all about?” He then explained that he was tired of hearing from people about how lucky he is to have the kind of cancer he has, or how fortunate he was that they caught it so soon, or how fortuitous that it has such a high cure rate, and other equally disturbing “helpful” responses. Kevin then went on to describe just what his treatment entails. (I cannot put that in the bulletin. Suffice to say that any guy would not think he was lucky.) Kevin was getting more and more frustrated by people who were trying to be supportive and hopeful but were saying things that actually infuriated him. I told him about a hospital chaplain I worked with, who said that she refuses to call a certain priest in particular situations. She called this priest in one day after a woman had just lost her child. His helpful response to her loss was, “Just remember that you can have other children.” Saying something like this is, of course, true but not the compassionate thing to say. I also shared with Kevin a time when I was called on to offer support to a woman who had just lost her unborn child (at 32 weeks pregnant). As I walked into the room my prayer was simply, “Lord, if necessary, help me to say nothing at all but, most importantly, help me to say nothing stupid.”

The most difficult situations for many of us is trying to help people who are going through particularly difficult, or even tragic, moments in their lives. We are not always sure what to say or what to do. True suffering impacts the whole person at every dimension of their being. This experience of suffering is objective and real and, as such, has physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual ramifications for the individual. Therefore, the true sense of evil that comes through suffering needs to be addressed in multiple ways. Each individual dimension that defines a person’s sense of self has an impact on the others. Hence, if a person is physically ill, say cancer, that will impact the other levels. Or, if a person is depressed, it can bring about physical issues. Or, if a person is struggling with a relationship issue, say infidelity, then that will lead to emotional distress, which can manifest itself in the other dimensions of a person. Recognizing that suffering is always an objective reality, it is at the same time subjective in nature. How each person responds to the pain in his or her life is not based on the particular level of hardship involved, nor to the extent that it impacts one’s life. Rather, many factors will determine how a particular person comes to terms with the adversity they encounter. Each individual has different thresholds for pain and hardship: life experience, personality traits, levels of faith, and so forth, and each factor influences the person’s ability to cope with the stress and travail that accompanies suffering.

It is the responsibility of every Christian to learn the lesson of the Good Samaritan. We must reach out to others in the midst of their suffering. We must show compassion. The word ‘compassion’ comes from a Latin word and if translated literally, would be “to suffer with.” We are called to walk the journey with the person who is suffering. We are not there to give them answers, but simply to care for them in their need. The person who suffers needs to know that they are not alone. We are called to be the presence of Christ, and like the Samaritan, to take on whatever we can to lighten the burdens of others. We do that by stopping and truly giving our attention to the person. It is about listening to the other. It is about having true empathy and recognizing that not all people enter into suffering in the same way. It is about meeting the person where they are. It is about putting a human face on the love that God desires to share with this person. And it helps to create the dynamic that the person is not alone. We must also realize that as we treat our brother or sister with compassion, it is really Christ we are serving in them, and through them.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,