February 9, 2020: Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In my first parish, Saint John in Wellesley, I had a communion call for Dorothy—an amazing lady! When I began visiting her, she was in her late 80’s and had been homebound for a few years. While attending a wedding reception when Dorothy was in her mid-70’s, she had a terrible accident. She was standing at the top of the grand stairway in a hotel and she passed out and fell backwards over the banister. She landed on the stairs, breaking several bones and severely damaging her back. For the rest of her life Dorothy would be in constant pain. And the strongest pain medication she could take was Tylenol; everything else made her nauseas.

When I first met Dorothy, I never guessed the severe pain she was in. She always was dressed impeccably, had a smile on her face, and spoke about the wonderful things in her life. She also had a large house which she cleaned herself. She would still get down on her hands and knees to wash the floors. She would not allow anyone else to do the cleaning because they could not meet her meticulous standards. And I never entered her home without it looking immaculate. Everything was always in its place and well maintained.

The amazing thing about Dorothy was that I do not remember ever hearing her complain about her situation. Her biggest concern was her estranged daughter: it had been some years since she heard from her. But the rest of her life was focused on the good things God had given her. It would have been easy for Dorothy to wallow in self-pity, considering her physical issues, but instead she focused on God’s graciousness in her life. Her faith really was the bedrock of how she lived her life.

At times it is very easy for any one of us to get focused on the challenges and issues of our lives. That focus causes us to lose sight of what God is doing in our lives, and our life becomes about what we do not have. It becomes centered in all the things that have gone wrong. We become more concerned about what is missing in our life than what we have.

The problem with suffering is that it can become the reference point for our entire life. It is not an issue of how big or small the suffering may be. Each of us is impacted by suffering in our own unique way. Our life can become consumed by the events, circumstances, trauma, abuse, and the like, that we encounter. The question is—how will we choose to address what has naturally become a focal point in our life? It is easy to stay focused on our real struggles. But we must ask ourselves—when we do this, what does it accomplish? When our life becomes consumed by the issues that are real but, at the same time, not the sum total of who we are as a person—what do we do?

I think Dorothy is a wonderful example for us. Her life was not defined by her limitations. Her life was not defined by her pain. Her life was not defined by the knowledge that nothing could really alleviate or even lessen her pain or struggle. Instead, she focused on what could give her a sense of purpose. She focused on what could give her hope. She focused on what could help her face each morning and give her a reason to get out of bed, and discover what each new day could teach her about life and her faith. She resolutely faced each day without fear and without a sense of wallowing: each day presented another opportunity to experience life anew.

Ultimately what we must recognize is that suffering is real, but it need not define who we are as a person. The love of God is greater than any negative experience we may have, and as Saint John Paul II wrote, “Those who share in Christ’s suffering have before their eyes the Paschal Mystery of the cross and resurrection in which Christ descends, in the first phase, to the ultimate limits of human weakness and impotence: indeed He dies nailed to the cross. But if, at the same time, in this weakness there is accomplished his lifting up, confirmed by the power of the resurrection, then this means that the weaknesses of all human sufferings are capable of being infused with the same power of God manifested in Christ’s cross.” (Salvific Doloris Art. 23)
For Dorothy, what essentially defined her attitude and approach to life was her faith in Christ and all that He accomplished for us. It was her faith that defined how she came to terms with all that she experienced. The question we need to ask ourselves as we face the difficulties and uncertainties of life is—what will we focus on in our life that will define us? Will it be the experience of suffering and pain? Or... will it be our faith in Christ?

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,

Fr. Brian