



## *Thoughts on the Journey...*

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On any given day in the church offices, you never know who may come through the door and what their need may be. Sometimes its emotional support, sometimes spiritual, sometimes physical, and sometimes financial. Once in awhile, the need involves all of the above.

As gatekeepers of the church finances, it is our responsibility to be good stewards of the money that our parishioners contribute. So we take the task of assessing requests for charity seriously - and there are many requests. I try hard not to be cynical in my dealings with people seeking money, but let's face it, there are people who take advantage of kindness and are fraudulent in their appeal. Sometimes it's obvious and sometimes it's not. When it's not obvious, I usually say a quick mental prayer and let my intuition decide the outcome.

Recently, a young woman came into the office seeking help. She was a working mother of 4 children who was also taking care of her aging father. I could tell by her lowered eyes and humbled posturing that it was embarrassing to ask for help. I could also tell by the tone in her voice that her situation was dire. When she lifted her eyes and began to tell me her situation, her now direct eye contact was pleading with me to listen. Like all people trying to make ends meet, all it takes is one incident, one extra bill that upsets the entire order of what bill gets paid and when. The Holy Spirit was in the mix of our conversation and we paid the bill that would bring her some relief. Her exhale and gratitude made me grateful for the generosity of our parishioners that afforded us the opportunity to help her.

As is the case with some people we encounter, I couldn't get her off my mind, so I put her in my prayers. A week had passed and I came across her phone number as I was clearing some papers off my desk. The voice of the Spirit prompted me to call her and see how things were going and to give her some community resources for help. She was at work and asked if I would wait so she could take break. When she returned to the phone she began to unfold the woes of her life as a single mother and recovering addict. At one point, the words that I have heard from countless people came out of her mouth, "I guess God is punishing me for all the sins of my past. I just wonder how long I will have to en-

sure his wrath." My heart sank at her comment.

In the gospel of Luke, people came to Jesus inquiring about the Galileans caught in the circumstance of tragedy caused by the cruelty of Pilate. They wondered if they were more sinful than those who did not suffer tragedy and misfortune. Jesus responded,

**"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means!"**

Jesus firmly told them to repent and then told the people a parable about a person who planted a fig tree in his orchard. For three years the tree did not produce fruit so he went to the gardener and told him to cut the tree down because it was exhausting the soil. The gardener told the owner to give the tree another year so he could cultivate and fertilize it. If after a year of working on the tree, if it does not produce fruit, then I will cut it down.

Jesus' parable is a story of repentance and mercy. Our God is loving and merciful. He is willing to work his grace in us, but we have to play our part and cooperate with his grace. He does not induce tragedy and hardship on the children he loves. Hardship, loss, tragedy and the like are all part of the human condition and often our own sinfulness. An essential part of Jesus' mission during his earthly life was to show us the mercy and love of the Father and dispel the notion of a vengeful angry God.

When the young woman I was speaking with on the phone finished telling me of her privation and her deserved "wrath" of God, I pointed out to her that she came to a place of God and he blessed her with the help she was seeking. The Spirit was then prompting me to tell her who God is and who God isn't; he's NOT a gardener of souls who sows trauma and tragedy. However, he IS the God-gardener who wants every one of his children to come to him. He is a God who is willing to suffer with us, to get down in the dirt, roll up his sleeves, and fertilize the roots of our souls so that we do not die but rather bear fruit and live. It's Lent! Seek his grace in his gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and experience God's love, compassion, and mercy.