

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent / Year A / March 29, 2020 (Fr. Giese)**

There is no doubt that our lives have been significantly changed with the Coronavirus epidemic. How long it will take before things get back to normal is not clear, and even then, there will probably be what is commonly referred to as “a new normal” meaning that there could be lasting effects on our outlook and our behavior as a result of this serious public health challenge. The changes that have mounted up in the wake of this situation are, in most instances, disruptions to life as we know it; unemployment for many, the travel industry in flux, the Olympics postponed, the turbulence in the stock market, schools closed, classes conducted remotely, sports events cancelled, social distancing everywhere, and the health care system severely taxed in some locations. Even the public celebration of Mass in churches has been suspended. I could go on at length but you are keenly aware of the upheaval too.

With so much disruption and so many activities curtailed or cancelled we could feel that our lives have been significantly diminished. And in some ways, they have been and will be for a while. But in the most important way, however, our lives have not been diminished. Activities and routines have been reduced, yes, but who we are as people who have faith in God through Jesus Christ have not been lessened at all. And that is an important thing to keep in mind.

Saint Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans which was our second reading today. To Saint Paul, what is a truly diminished life is life according to the flesh only. Now, I want to be clear, Saint Paul is not saying that human flesh or the body is evil. He knew full well that the Son of God took on human flesh, to be one of us, to save us by his obedience and death on the cross in human flesh. Saint Paul knew that the Son of God sanctified humanity by joining humanity to his divine nature. So the body is not evil.

But what did he mean when he referred to those who are in the flesh and how they cannot please God? I believe that he was referring to life without God, life without the Spirit of God. Such a life, to Saint Paul, is truly a diminished life in the most important ways. How so? Well, living with indifference to God, that is, to intentionally closing oneself off from the presence and love of God and giving no thought to God’s plans or intentions, means refusing the gifts of God. It means seeing others only in as much as they are as human beings and therefore devoid of God

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so devoid of eternal value and worth. To live according to the flesh only means never lifting one's heart and spirit to God in prayer for oneself and even for others.

To live a life with indifference to God is to live life only on one level, the human level, the level of flesh and that is a diminished, limited life no matter how full and active it might be in every other way. You see, a life that is open to the Spirit of God knows what it is to be loved entirely, fully, even when you aren't so loveable, even when you are in need of forgiveness. Life in the Spirit of God gives you that kind of confidence in the love of God.

Life with the spirit of God strengthens a person to seek to do extraordinary things like truly forgiving someone. Life lived in the Spirit of God enables you to make sacrifices small and great without counting the cost or keeping score, and to find blessing and happiness where and when those things seem far away. Life in the Spirit of God also gives vision to see others as God sees them, to see their worth and value, even when they don't see it themselves.

Life led in the spirit of God also gives wisdom, the ability to see beyond the current moment or the appeal of something to things that are of greater, lasting value. We see this very wisdom at work in Jesus' temptations in the desert which were recounted in the gospel reading of the first Sunday of Lent. At every turn, whether it was to turn stones to bread, to amaze people by jumping from the parapet of the temple without being hurt, Jesus was able, by the Spirit of God at work in his human life to rely on God's wisdom that he learned in the Scriptures and to see and know what is of truly lasting value. Life in the Spirit of God will do that for us too.

And life in the Spirit of God means leading life not just here in these surrounding but at the same time leading life in the Kingdom of God which Jesus said was at hand, not far away, but to be found in this life. And that gives the one who lives with the Spirit of God at work in him or her confidence even in the face of death, knowing that the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to his or her mortal body through his Spirit dwelling within them. The believer with the Spirit of God knows that death is life without God and the one who dies to life without God in baptism has already begun to live eternal life. In his letter his letter to the Galatians, 5:22 Saint Paul describes what the fruits, or effects, are of life in the Spirit. He says that they are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are

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many of the things that make heaven, heaven, aren't they? And when they are at work in you, even with fewer activities and greater challenges, your actual life is not diminished in any way because your life will be filled with the Spirit of God at work in you. And that in any circumstance or place, is life to the full.