

## Annual Blue Mass/24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 15, 2019      11:00 a.m.      St. Catherine of Siena, Portage

My brother priests and Deacons; dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ. We come together in this beautiful church here at St. Catherine's on this rainy September Sunday morning from many different places, first of all, to offer praise and thanks to our Loving and Merciful God. But we also come together to celebrate our "Annual Blue Mass"----to pray for those among us who devote their lives to "saving" others from life's dangerous and tragic circumstances. We honor those who, at a moment's notice and with no second thoughts, leave their own comfortable homes and safe places, to be the first responders to whatever the "9-1-1" emergency is. As we express our appreciation, our respect and our admiration to those who are like "Guardian Angels" who protect all of us, we also ask their actual Guardian Angels to watch over them, as well as for God's special blessings upon each and every one of them.

Every year we try to schedule this annual Mass as close to the national observance of the "9/11" terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Shanksville, Pa., which of course we all observed in our own ways this past Wednesday. We are forever mindful of those awful events that took place 18 years ago, on September 11, 2001. It was one of those moments in our collective consciousness that remains as fresh today as it was on that horrific day. And as we were all shocked and speechless in the face of what we were seeing and hearing, I think it's safe to say that most of us immediately turned to God in prayer. But the heroes of that day and throughout the many days, weeks and months that followed, were the First Responders who rushed into the collapsing buildings and into the rubble and all the confusion, trying to save and protect others, which, sadly, resulted in hundreds of those same First Responders losing their own lives.

And so we take this occasion, as People of Faith, not only to remember that horrific event, but also to thank and honor those in our communities who are our present-day heroes: our military personnel, police and safety officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical technicians---those who day-in and day-out defend, protect, and serve the rest of us here in Portage, Kalamazoo, and all the

communities where we live and work throughout the 9 counties that make up the Diocese of Kalamazoo.

And so I ask those here today who are currently serving as any of those “first responders” OR are retired from service in any of those fields of service please stand so that we can see you and offer you our heartfelt thanks and respect.....

I also want to recognize our civic leaders and elected officials who are here with us this morning--- Mayor of Portage, Patricia Randall, Kalamazoo County Sheriff, Sheriff Fuller, and Kalamazoo Chief of Police, Kerryann Thomas, and any other of our public servants or elected officials who are here this morning: would you all please stand as well?.....

And finally, I would like to invite any of the spouses, parents, or children of our First Responders here this morning, active or retired, to also please stand so we can thank you for so generously and bravely sharing your loved one with all of us.....

On top of the changes that have taken place in our daily lives since that moment 18 years ago, our society has changed over these years, as we experience greater division and unrest in general, increased violence and racial tensions throughout our country, the greater frequency of mass shootings, as well as the inability, or unwillingness, to have respectful or civil discourse in our personal or social media communications.

First Responders deal with a wide spectrum of situations calling for help, from the “cat stuck in the tree, or my keys locked in my car”, all the way to dealing with life’s terrible tragedies due to serious accidents, violent crimes, or natural disasters. And so we pray for you----we pray with you----for an end to violence----for an end to hatred---for an end to intolerance of any sort; and we pray for a renewed determination and a shared sense of hope that we will live together in peace and security. We pray for God’s Grace; we pray for God’s Mercy.

As was pretty obvious, the overarching theme of the Scripture Readings we heard proclaimed just a few moments ago spoke clearly and boldly of those two themes: God’s Grace and Mercy.

The First Reading from the Second Book of Samuel showed us the great King David, singing God’s praises, and giving thanks to God. What made David such a great King is that he knew his own limitations, that he needed God’s Mercy, and

he absolutely knew that He needed God's Help, which is why he used all those words to describe how God is his: *"rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, saving horn, stronghold, refuge, and savior"*.

We also heard the great St. Paul in today's Second Reading in his Letter to Timothy, openly *"remembering"* that he had been a terrible sinner----*"a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant sinner"*; and he admitted that it was only because God *"treated him mercifully"* that he was able to turn away from those great sins.

It troubles me greatly as I observe the growing divisions within our society, I can't help but wonder if we, unlike King David and St. Paul, have mistakenly concluded that we don't need God.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus being criticized by the Pharisees and the Scribes because He welcomed and ate with tax collectors and public sinners. What they intended as an allegation or criticism, Jesus took as a complement, because that is exactly what Jesus came into the world to do: to welcome sinners and eat with them.

Jesus knew that it was useless to try to reason with people like that who were so closed-minded, so He decided to explain why it was necessary for Him to do what He was doing and to be with those He was with by telling 3 powerful parables: 1) the parable of the Lost Sheep, 2) the parable of the Lost Coin, and 3) the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

What is interesting about each of those parables is that Jesus' point wasn't so much about who or what was "lost"---the sheep, the coin, and the younger son----as much as it was on the one who was doing the Searching: the Owner of the 100 sheep who leaves the 99 to search for the one that was lost; the Woman who owned the 10 coins and was willing to turn the entire house upside down to look for the one lost coin; and the Loving Father, whose younger son so gravely insulted him and left home to enjoy his fortune, and yet that same Father spent every day waiting, longing, and hoping that his son would "come to his senses" and return. In each case, when the sheep was rescued, the coin was found, and when the son was reconciled---there was no need for any explanations or apologies----it was just time to rejoice and to celebrate the fact that unity was restored.

The Good News of God's Word today, my Friends, is a reminder to all of us about how precious we are to our Loving God---much more precious than a lost sheep, or a missing coin. Our Good News today reminds us how far God has gone to find us, and to reunite us with Him. All we need to do is look at the Crucifix---that says it all; that tells us how far our Loving God has gone to save us from our sins.

The Scribes and Pharisees were absolutely right: Jesus DOES welcome sinners and eats with them. Look around-----It's US! WE are them! As we join together to give God our worship and praise, we are one; there are no distinctions among us. We are the ones that Jesus LONGS to be with. And I hope we are here today because we realize that while we don't deserve God's Mercy, we desperately need it.

Just as we affirm that we should "never forget" what happened on September 11, 2001, even more should we "never forget" how our Loving God wants nothing more than to be One with us, to show us His Mercy, and to help us to live together in Peace. As we pray for an end to conflicts, divisions, violence, and all acts of terrorism---as we work to rid the world of poverty, injustice and any kind of discrimination---as we pray for those among us who are ready to protect and safeguard those among us when we are in trouble---Let us "rejoice and be glad" this day because we, who were lost are forever found, and we are held close in our Loving God's embrace. May we never forget how much God loves us; may we always remember how much we need the Mercy He longs to give us.

In spite of our sins, our God loves us and won't rest until we are one with Him here in this world, and eventually Home with Him forever in Heaven. When we come to realize that, and live in that Good News, we will be able to say the words we heard St. Paul say at the end of this morning's Second Reading: *"To the King of the ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God---may we give Him honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."*

God bless you, now and always!