

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent “Grace in Times of Trouble”

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My friends, we all have moments when we seek grace in times of trouble. Whether we are dealing with the loss of a loved one, the loss of our health, the loss of a job or a relationship, we all come face to face with times of suffering and we can wonder how best to cope with it as a person of faith. Just a quick personal story as an example, I can't believe it has been about a year now from that day I came down with appendicitis. Remember that? I wondered to myself, was it something I ate? Was it a stomach bug? By the next morning, I was in incredible pain. Finally a brother priest told me, “Frank, you are an idiot. Get to the doctor”. Great advice. At the urgent care, they took one look at me and threw me into an ambulance for a trip to the emergency room. That was a real odyssey. And we all have days like that, we do, this was mine. In the ambulance, I remember having a conversation with God as I felt every bump on the way to the hospital. I think I said something playful like, “God, just so you know, it is Saturday morning and I have mass tonight at my parish.” And God responded. He said, “Frank, you are beautifully made as a mortal. This is what mortality is. And, it is MY parish not yours.” It was a very liberating moment. It is hard to describe how liberating it was. I was in a lot of pain, but I remember smiling at the thought that, everything I thought that was important earlier really wasn't that important. Everything I thought I owned, I really didn't own. Even the hospital gown I was wearing was on loan to me. All I had in that moment, all I had left on the planet, was my relationship with God. That was it. And this is a very good memory. I don't know how to communicate with you how a partially ruptured appendix can also be a good memory.

I share that story because the author of Hebrews in our second reading comments, “In the days when Christ Jesus was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Learning obedience through suffering, I get that and trust me it is good news, not bad. We have all had moments when we learned obedience through suffering. It is how we receive grace in times of trouble. Jesus teaches us by example in our Gospel reading today.

The Gospel this Sunday recounts Jesus' preparation for his upcoming passion and death. He knows it is coming. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus is reflecting now on his upcoming suffering and death and I am comforted that even Jesus in his humanity felt troubled by it. He says, "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Father, glorify your name. I like this passage because I believe Jesus is giving us an insight here as to how we should approach our own mortality and times of suffering.

Jesus says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.” That is a beautiful image, don’t you think? But oh how our culture is uncomfortable with the topic of suffering and mortality! We would rather think about something else, anything else, and we spend a lot of money to help us forget about our troubles. And, by the way, I believe this is what Jesus was getting at when he warns us, “Whoever loves this life, loses it. Whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.” With this, I think Jesus is simply warning us to not self-medicate our problems away all the time in a vain search for false comforts. I think most of us know some of the greatest moments of spiritual growth in life happen in times when we are in fact not comfortable, during times of trial, when we find ways to glorify God’s name in word and deed even through our hardships.

How do we do that? I think this journey begins with being comfortable knowing that we are beautifully made to be mortal. From a faith point of view, this recognition is not morbid. Quite the contrary, remembering our finitude invites us to live our lives to the fullest each and every day we are given. We should avoid wasting the precious time we have so we can focus on what really matters in this life, loving God and the people around us. During times of sickness, during times of loss and grief, we are reminded of what is really important in life. I think there is a number of us here who can relate with this. Those of us here who know what it is like to be on a gurney being rolled into surgery, you know that all the things that you thought were important earlier is simplified to about three things: thoughts of your loved ones, a hope for a competent surgeon and a good and gracious God.

And so, for this week of Lent leading up to Palm Sunday, it may be helpful for all of us to begin meditating on how God incarnate became the grain of wheat for us all, indeed has become food and drink for us in the Eucharist, and how God is leading us to an eternal harvest. We are invited this week to reflect once more on the words we heard on Ash Wednesday, remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. And then ask ourselves, how can I be more like that grain of wheat? What is one sacrifice I can make this week that will help me grow in love for God and the people in my life? Can I learn obedience to God in my times of suffering? In times of trouble, can I follow Jesus’ example to glorify God’s name in word and deed? By doing so, I believe we will receive all the grace we need in good times and in bad to prepare ourselves and those we love for something far more wonderful than anything this world can ever offer us: our Easter hope.