

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Gospel of Hope”
Fr. Frank Schuster

These past several month have been difficult for so many of us. Covid-19 has turned the world upside down. Even as society begins to reopen, we can still be tempted by some fears. Will there be a second wave of this virus? Will we have to lock down society again? Will I or a loved one eventually catch it? And, as much as we do our best to forget about the times we live in, every time we see a mask, we get reminded about it.

How do we deal with something as insidious as fear? All throughout history, the topic of how to best understand and cope with fear has preoccupied more than few philosophers, theologians and even scientists. The psychologist Carl Jung believed that most of our deepest spiritual and psychological dysfunctions could be attributed in some manner to an unresolved fear of death. His take is that we tend to bury that fear really deep down inside of us as a coping mechanism. But that fear is nevertheless still there subconsciously and expresses itself in many different ways, not all of them are good. It can be at the core of a person’s depression. It can be at the root of a midlife crises. It can also be the underlying cause of a life-long addiction. And the list goes on. I personally find it fascinating at how many blockbuster movies there are that are drenched with violence, death and dysfunction. I wonder if these movies are popular because they are a way to somehow subconsciously cope with our deepest fears. What is the answer to this age-old dilemma?

All of this is lengthy introduction to our second reading from St. Paul to the Romans. Let’s begin with the very first sentence of our second reading today. St. Paul writes, “Brothers and sisters, are you unaware that we who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” All right, let’s stop right there! Who is St. Paul writing to? He is writing to a very small group of fledgling Christians in Rome. These Christians were under a constant threat of being martyred for identifying themselves as Christians. So St. Paul is directing his pastoral letter to the heart of what they fear the most, namely death. He continues, “We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.”

One way of looking at what St. Paul is doing in our second reading is providing us an inoculation of sorts. If we are doing everything we can to bury the fear of death inside of us, St. Paul wants to rub our faces in it. Our Catholic faith has a way of doing the same thing, especially when we celebrate Mass. We process in and out of the Church following a crucifix, we begin mass with the sign of the cross, and we proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Eucharistic Prayer. And, in case we missed this all somehow, the final blessing at the end of Mass is given with the sign of the cross. It feels like the Mass itself is an inoculation that should stir up in the soul a defense against the dis-ease of our innermost fears.

Our faith challenges us to profess with St. Paul, “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.” And what this means is, if death does not have power over Jesus, death no longer has to have power over us. And, I think this is the best way for us to understand our Gospel reading this weekend.

Jesus words today are really jarring. He says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” He says, “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.” What does he mean by saying that? He is saying this because there is nothing we can say or do that can add one more minute to our life or to the lives of our loved ones. Only Jesus has the words of everlasting life. Only Jesus can keep our relationships intact forever.

Once we truly unite ourselves to Jesus in our thoughts and actions, our future becomes filled with hope no matter what cross we have to carry today. This hope in the future should have a direct effect on how I live my life in this moment that is different from those who do not have this hope. My friends, once we let our hearts become transformed by this Gospel of hope Jesus freely offers us, only then can we finally be liberated from fear. Only then can we truly be free.