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“Entering into Jesus’ Five-Fold Mercy in the Year of Mercy”

Retreat for Lay People

Casa Maria Retreat House of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word, Irondale, AL

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

February 13, 2016

Is 58:9-14, Ps 86, Lk 5:27-32

Recognizing our Cancer and Going to the Doctor for Healing

- "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth," we prayed several times today in the Responsorial Psalm. And the Truth incarnate responds in the Gospel, first for Matthew and then for all of us, by coming into our lives and saying, "Follow me!" And on this second day of our retreat and fourth day of our Lenten pilgrimage, it's key for us to follow where the Lord seeks to lead us. He wants to lead us to a whole-hearted conversion that will open us to receive more and more deeply the outpouring of his merciful love.
- Lent is fundamentally about the grace God gives us to convert and how he wants us to receive and respond to that help. For this to occur, we must first to grasp what an unbelievable gift that grace of conversion is. This is something St. Matthew was very much aware of. He was a despised tax collector who used to extort money from his own people to give it to the occupying Romans. The way the Roman tax system worked was that the Romans needed to get a set fee from a given territory; everything the tax collectors got beyond that was theirs to keep. Because of this system, many tax collectors, filled with greed, would begin rapaciously to rip off their own people with the help of the Roman army. They were like modern mafia dons who extort neighborhood small businesses and even families to pay “protection fees” lest an “accident” happen to their businesses or loved ones. For Jesus to go after Matthew at his customs post then would be as dramatic as his going into the Playboy Mansion today and calling Hugh Hefner from his babes, or entering into Al Capone’s speakeasy and calling him from his booze and hundred dollar bills. But Jesus desires mercy and he came to call sinners to repentance and he was going to show that by going after one of the most notorious sinners of his day. Matthew must have heard about Jesus and perhaps even stood at a distance to hear him speak, but likely thought that he would never be accepted among Jesus' associates not to mention friends. Yet in today's Gospel Jesus enters the place where he was working and says to him, "Follow me!"
- A week ago I was standing in the Church of St. Louis of the French in Rome looking once more at the most famous depiction of this scene, by Caravaggio, which has so much theological depth to it. Jesus enters a dark room with light shining behind him, a sign that he was calling Matthew from darkness into light. There’s in the room a closed window with a perpendicular wooden pane, a sign that in order to open ourselves to the light we have to embrace the Cross, we need to need to suffer, we need to die to our old ways, something that would be proposed to Matthew. Jesus calls to Matthew and points to him with his outstretched index finger. Scholars have long noted that Jesus’ hand and finger is identical to the hand and finger that Michelangelo gave to God in the scene of creation in the Last Supper. Jesus was giving Matthew, in other words, a chance at a new creation, of having the “spirit of life” breathed into his sinful, dead soul. And as he’s doing this and the rays of light are beginning to hit him as Jesus says, “Follow me!” we see Matthew’s two hands. His left is pointing to himself, to his heart, and almost saying with shock, “Do you mean me?” His right hand, however, is still grasping onto the coins that were on the table. The same Jesus who entered that room bringing the light into darkness, the same Jesus who extended his hand and offer of new life, the same Jesus who called Matthew is here in this Chapel extending his hand and his call and his light to us.
- What was Matthew’s response? It was two-fold. First, he immediately left everything to follow Jesus. He left all his money on the table, all his ledgers, everything. St. Paul implored the Christians in Corinth — words we heard on Ash Wednesday — not to receive the grace of God's gift of conversion in vain, and Matthew certainly didn't! But his response didn't stop there. He celebrated his conversion! He called together his friends for a party with Jesus, presumably as well so that they could not only share in his unbelievable

turnaround but experience a similar one.

- When the Scribes and the Pharisees saw Jesus not only in a sinner's house but actually eating with him, they were scandalized. There's an aphorism that we become like the company we keep and the Pharisees and Scribes totally avoided notorious sinners lest they become like them. They asked the disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" They didn't think that it was possible that Jesus could lift all the sinners up to God's level rather than become corrupted by descending to theirs. Jesus, overhearing them, said, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have come not to call the righteous to repentance but sinners."
- What Matthew intuitively grasped, and the Scribes and Pharisees obstinately didn't, was that he was sick. He knew his sins were a terrible cancer of the soul and, even though he was surrounded by money, he was dying unhappy and unfilled. When Jesus the doctor appeared and said he wanted to treat him, Matthew immediately responded and rejoiced. The problem for the Scribes and Pharisees is that they didn't recognize they, too, were sick, that they, too, were sinners. One of their most harmful characteristics is that they didn't recognize they *needed* Jesus.
- Most Catholics and Christians recognize that we need Jesus, but I'm not sure we grasp how much we need him. We acknowledge that we needed Jesus to save us. We acknowledge that we needed him to do all that he did in order to make eternal life possible. But at a day-to-day level, many of us pretend as if we're self-sufficient and don't really need him all that much. Like the Pharisees, we can believe ourselves righteous, not sick, and therefore we'll wait for the doctor until we are really sick and are in some crisis. What Lent is meant to help us to grasp is how deep is our sickness and how desperately we need Jesus every day. We desperately need him to cure our selfishness. We acutely need him to treat our hardened hearts. We critically need him to remedy our pride, envy, lust, gluttony, laziness, anger, and greed. We're never really going to appreciate who he is until we recognize that we're ill and need the divine Physician.
- We need to make this even more concrete. If we wish to follow the example of St. Matthew in the Gospel, we need to put into action the call to conversion. To play with the analogy that Jesus gives us in the Gospel, we not only have to recognize that we need a doctor, but we must go to the doctor and do what he tells us is necessary for our cure. Sin is a progressive form of metastatic cancer that will kill us – and we never know quite how soon. Jesus is the oncologist who can and wants to cure us, but he won't treat us against our consent. To be saved we first have to go to him, and then we need to follow his treatment regimen.
 - This will involve first the surgery of the confessional, which he set up as the soul's operating room on Easter Sunday evening. But will we trust in the doctor enough to go so that he can cut us open, take out what is killing us, and sew us back up better than before?
 - It will also involve the radiation of prayer, where we put ourselves in the radioactive presence of Jesus, whose gamma rays flow out from the monstrance and the tabernacle, slowly invading each of our cells. Do we trust the Divine Physician enough to pray as he calls us to do?
 - Finally, it will involve the chemo that will kill those fast-growing areas within us that are prone to spiritual cancer, what we call the near occasions of sin. We may lose our appetite for the things that have fed us, but this is part of the cure. Our hair may fall out, but maybe we can benefit from this cure of our vanity. We may lose weight, but, after all, we have to trim down to fit through the eye of the needle, which is the door to heaven.
 - The key question is whether we're willing to follow the regimen of the Divine Physician, who will cure us if we let him. Or will we be like those patients who, for whatever reason, don't go to the doctor and don't follow his advice?
- At the end of St. Matthew's account of his calling, he adds another detail from the scene that St. Luke omits. It's the Communion antiphon for today's Mass. Jesus tells his critics, "Go and learn the meaning of the expression, 'It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.'" If we're going to be following the Lord, if we're going to be learning his truth so that we may walk in his ways, if we're going to be fasting for what he hungers, then we need to desire mercy as he desires mercy. Lent is not principally about our sacrifices but God's superabundant mercy. The sign that we're being healed by Jesus is that we begin to desire Mercy like he does. That's what this retreat is all about. That's what this extraordinary year is all about. That's what Christian life is all about.
- In today's first reading, we continue with the passage from the Book of Isaiah that we first encountered

yesterday when God describes for us the type of fasting that is pleasing to him because it helps us to hunger for what he hungers for — the loving merciful concern for his sons and daughters — and helps us to feed their hungers and needs. In today's passage, God continues to tell us the types of fasting and sacrifices he wants from us, the type of compassion that is part of our rehabilitation. He wants us to remove from our midst all oppression, false accusation and malicious speech. Is this something we're really seeking to do? That we're hungering for? That we're as desperate as God is to see eliminated? He says he wants us to bestow our bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted. Are we actually sharing our food with others or helping the hungry to eat to satiation? This is one of God's priorities for us this Lent and if we're following him, if we're walking in his ways, we will be as urgently trying to feed the hungry as a mother is to feed famished children. He continues that he wants us to follow his pursuits, not our own, on the Sabbath, and those pursuits involve not speaking with malice, not seeking our own interests but those of others. Is that the way we live Sundays? The fact that we are able to tolerate oppression, false accusations and malicious speech in our midst, the fact that some people go without adequate nourishment or any at all in our cities, the fact that so many do their own thing on Sundays rather than God's thing and we don't lose sleep over it, is a sign of our own illness, of how much we need the Divine Physician. But the Divine Physician today comes with his healing power. He comes to meet us not at the customs place but at our customary place to call us from our old habits and help us to live with him in the light and become a sign of conversion to others, calling them to experience from Jesus the same liberation. Today he has another meal with sinners, not in Matthew's house, but in his own, or actually in his Mother's, the Casa Maria. And he has invited us. Let us beg him for the grace to grasp that we are sinners who desperately need him each day to heal us. And let us, through the intercession of St. Matthew, respond to that help to leave our old habits, our old "customs" on the table, and immediately get up to follow him wherever he leads so that, having learned from him his way, we may walk in his truth all the way to the eternal banquet with Matthew, Mary and all the saints!