

Homily for February 11th 2018

6th Week of Ordinary Time

“They know if you're sick and they care when you die”.

56 years ago, when the speaker of The US House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn discovered that he had terminal cancer, he shocked everyone when he announced that he was going back to his small town in Bonham, Texas. Everyone said to him:

They have got the finest facilities in Washington, D. C., why go back to that little town.

Rayburn's words capture the theme for today's homily.

"Because in Bohman, Texas, they know if you're sick and they care when you die.

Speaker Rayburn needed community. Let's think about this word for a minute. It comes from a late 14th century word meaning “the common people, not the clergy and rulers”. And is associated with the word, “commonness and everybody”.

Now think about that in relation to this seasoned politician, who had lived his life at the centre of political power. He served as the Speaker of the House from 1940-1961 – the longest anyone ever served as Speaker - and was first elected in 1913. He was in Washington for 48 years. But when the time came for him to die, he wanted to be with the common people, because they “know if you're sick and they care when you die”.

Community, this is at the heart of what the body of Christ is all about. And what is it that joins each of us together? Participating, in Holy Communion. That's worth pondering. We are not just a communion, we are a Holy Communion who share in that most common meal, the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist. It doesn't matter your socio-economic status, your race, gender, education; political affiliation. When we are here we all have this in common:

In the eyes of Jesus we all matter. He holds us in his heart and calls us to himself so he can touch us with his holy, generous hands of love.

There is a story about a New York City policeman investigating a case. Even before he finished entering the number, he somehow knew he'd made a mistake. The phone rang once, twice – then someone picked it up. "You've got the wrong number!" a husky male voice snapped before the line went dead. Mystified, the policeman called again. "I said you got the wrong number!" came the voice. Once more the phone went dead. "How could he possibly know I had the wrong number?" the policeman asked himself. A cop is trained to be curious – and concerned. So he hit the redial function. "Hey, c'mon," the voice said. "Is this you again?" "Yea, it's me. I was wondering how you knew I had the wrong number before I even said anything." "You figure it out!" The phone slammed down. He sat there for a while, the receiver hanging loosely in his fingers.

He called the man back. "Did you figure it out yet?" the man asked. "The only thing I can think of is nobody ever calls you." "You got it!" The phone went dead for the fourth time. Chuckling, the officer dialed the man back. "What do you want now?" asked the man.

"I thought I'd call – just to say hello." "Hello? Why?" "Well, if nobody ever calls you, I thought maybe I should."

Here was a man who knew nothing of community, but only isolation. Such must've been the experience of the man at the centre of today's Gospel reading. We know from the Old Testament passage from Leviticus that one with Leprosy:

shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

Dwell in a habitation outside the camp; aka - a Leper Colony. It seems incredible to us today, but on the edge of every large city in the ancient world huge pits were dug, and in those pits lived the lepers of the community – those colonies where everyone else forming that community would stand out by his skin disease, dress, disheveled hair and announcement: "Unclean, unclean". A community for those who had no community.

And so those who were with Jesus on that day a leper showed up really didn't understand it. But, of course, they really had no means to. How could they possibly know that it was contagious only after long periods of very close contact? The only thing they knew about it was what it looked like and what it did to a person in the advanced stages. That they knew well. They understood how it maimed and disfigured. And that was enough for fear to take over.

In a world and a time in which the disease has all but been eradicated except in small pockets, we perhaps cannot appreciate the fear that accompanied this word in the ancient world of Jesus. It was a red flag word. It brought about the same responses as the word Plague did in the 1200s, or Small Pox in the 1700s, or Aids in the 1980s and 90s. It frightened them. They felt largely helpless against it, as indeed they were.

What happens when fear takes over is people do not act, they react. And reactions to leprosy were both swift and cruel. In times not far removed from our own people would be put to death by their own family. And if, by some remote possibility, they did escape this hovel of a colony and venture out into the streets, they would be quickly greeted with shouts of "leper," accompanied by stones to make them keep their distance. In Jesus' day a leper by law could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. So this was the heart of the matter. Not only did these wretched poor people have to endure the trials of an incurable affliction, they also were isolated from society and kept from the community of faith. The horror of disease, a lifestyle of loneliness, isolation and hopelessness where could they find hope? The only friend a leper had was Jesus himself. In this life they were doomed. It was walking death.

And yet knowing all this, the man, comes to Jesus with humble, trusting faith: Do you hear his cry as he kneels before the Lord?

"If you will, you can make me clean."

He doesn't come demanding but pleading – entrusting his life to the will of the saviour. How tender is Jesus' response:

41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.”

Can you appreciate what this would have meant to this man? Rather than his touch infecting Jesus, Jesus’ touch heals the man. Then Jesus directs him to go to the priest, who on pronouncing him clean can then restore him to the Community.

I think this is such an important picture for our day and what it means to be the Church. We are not going to primarily draw people to Jesus through sound argument – although there is a place for what is called apologetics. But in this soundbite world there are so many words. What is most required today, I believe, is the continued formation of St. Peter’s as a place where people encounter the loving touch of Jesus – be it through our website, but most importantly when they come among us. Who knows how many people here today feel like the New Yorker – that leper - isolated and cut off from the world? How many today, have virtual communities but no places where they experience Holy Communion?

For us to have a voice where people might consider the Gospel of Jesus they need to know that they have a place in this fellowship, where priests, and lay ministers alike are embodying the message that you are safe here and we want to get to know you.

Genuine community that is a place where we witness events like one I saw last Saturday. A boy, 8 years old came in for his 1st Reconciliation. He had really prepared his confession. Once the Lord Jesus absolved him, he stood up and skipped out of my office. I thought to myself, what a vivid image of what the Church is to be all about. I imagine that leper had a skip in his step and he went forward to tell everyone about the care he received at the hands of Jesus.

May we ponder upon this story and continue to intentionally foster at St. Peter’s a place that’s like, well like Bonham Texas where:

“They know if you're sick and they care when you die”.