

Physical Health - Spiritual Health

5th Sunday of Lent

(Reading I - Jeremiah 31:31-34, Reading II - Hebrews 5:7-9, Gospel - John 12:20-33)

Today we find ourselves deep in the season of Lent. I realize that many of you have given up a favorite food or activity as a Lenten sacrifice, or perhaps you've added special observances, such as the Stations of the Cross. And you feel that you are truly in the spirit of preparation. Regardless of what you've done or haven't done, today is an excellent time to pause for a moment and ask yourself this question, "Why have I made this extra effort, and how is my spiritual health as I approach Holy Week and the joyous Easter season?"

Before you answer that question, let me place it into an ordinary context. Yesterday in the warmth of the 60 degree spring sun I was slowly laying up a new concrete wall on a 20' section of our greenhouse. If I were a mason, I'd starve! But you know, I felt great working on that wall. Fit and healthy. For quite a few years now *I've been taking my good health for granted...* however, at the urging of my wife, I'm nearing the end of a two-month round of doctors visits, blood tests, teeth and eye exams... well, the whole 9 yards! And I like what I'm hearing from my doctors: low blood sugar, normal PSA, great blood pressure—you get the picture.

Now some of this is my life style—I try to eat well and exercise. *But I'm also blessed with some genes that factor in too - quite an important aspect of our health.* In a way, I've been "coasting"... not really keeping track of my health, but instead reacting to issues as they arise. Now though, instead of taking my health for granted, I'm being proactive asking myself, "What can I do to be as healthy as possible as I approach my 60's?"

A few minutes ago I asked, "Why have you made the extra effort to observe Lent, and how is your spiritual health." It's pretty easy to see the parallel between that question and the one about my physical health. If your Lenten observances have been a bit like relying on a good genetic mix that you were born with, *aren't you really just taking your spiritual health for granted?*

"I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [...] All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more."

So writes the prophet Jeremiah in today's moving first reading. His words were for the Israelites, a people who had suffered, been driven into exile... seemingly without hope. The great Hebrew prophets, like Ezekiel echo this theme of struggle, despair and ultimately God's love for his people:

"I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit with you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts."

Jeremiah and Ezekiel's words transcend just their Hebrew audience... speaking directly to us, who often despair, struggle with life's challenges and harden our hearts against God's love. How can we truly be ready for the Lord's forgiveness?

That's where our spiritual health enters the picture. It enables us to face life's challenges prepared and proactive. Let's face it, we don't seek out life's tribulations... they have no problem at all in finding us! ***Good spiritual health*** that is based upon prayer, praise and thanksgiving can enable us to accept the difficult times... the suffering. By not taking our spiritual health for granted, we keep our hearts open to God's love.

During this time of Lenten preparation, we must look to the example that Jesus gave us: *he did not seek out suffering... instead he accepted it obediently.* Jesus was prepared: he prayed, fasted and praised God in the desert. ***“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.”*** as we heard in the Letter to the Hebrews. Despite the despair he would feel in the garden at Gethemene the night before he was crucified, he never turned away from his God... OUR GOD!

We can't afford to coast in life: to take our physical *OR* spiritual health for granted. If we do, we move through this life alone, unprotected... constantly struggling with the challenges we encounter.

“Why have we made this extra effort to prepare this Lent?” We know the answer! To be as spiritually fit as possible for the rigors of life and to celebrate the new life offered to us through Christ's passion, death and resurrection. We can't afford to be repeating the same old Lenten rituals without a heart-felt purpose. Coasting on our “spiritual genes” won't sustain us. We need to stretch ourselves spiritually: to read a few verses of scripture each day from The Bible and pray on what we've read... or recite the Rosary often and with a true spirit of reflection on the sorrowful, joyful, glorious or luminous mysteries. In other words, spend some time with God—our Creator and Redeemer.

We can do it... and enjoy the most fruitful Lenten observance ever... open to God as Jesus was: obedient and accepting. And on Easter Sunday, when HE is lifted up from the earth, we, too will be drawn up to HIM!

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