

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B

When I was a child, I had a propensity to stub my toe—almost always while riding my tricycle, and almost always my big right toe. I don't remember Neosporin, or any other ointment being put on it; I don't remember band-aids or bandages, I only remember that my stubbed toes really hurt, that they looked really bad, all bloody and gross, and that I invariably turned to my mother to make it better somehow. When I got older, and the hurts moved from stubbed toes to stubbed feelings, missed plays on the baseball diamond, subjects in school that I just couldn't seem to master: I turned to mom and dad to make it better somehow. Then I became an adult, and started encountering adult problems and challenges: work woes, life decisions, losing a parent; I knew that I wasn't meant to bear these burdens by myself, but that God had placed friends in my life, and I turned to them to make me feel better. It's something we do all throughout life: we look for other people who can help us, and make us feel good again. And it's part of our relationship with God as well: as we grow in knowledge of all that God has done to save us, as we grow in devotion and in prayer, as we mature spiritually, we turn to God with more frequency, in the hopes that he will make things better. And so it was in Jesus' day, in the few years of his ministry among his own people: they brought to him those afflicted with every sort of illness, ailment, and infirmity, and they came with but one request: heal this, make me or my friend here whole again.

This is one big broken world in which we live; truckloads of disappointments get dumped into most every life, and sometimes it seems as if life just has a big warehouse of tragedies, which are then trotted out day after day after day. There are so many things which it feels like it would just be so much nicer if we could just forget altogether: the relationships which we hoped would endure forever, but which just didn't work out. The job setbacks, the financial problems. And those are the relatively small difficulties: then there are the deaths of loved ones, each passing so painful for those who are left behind. And then there are the insurmountable things, which we would love to expel from our minds but which are so big, that they just can't be budged: the 9/11's, the holocausts, the wars, the tsunamis. And in the midst of all the rubble and debris, literal and figurative, stands the Christian alongside everyone else caught in this human drama, looking for someone to take away the pain; looking for our God, who alone, it would seem, can make pain this big, feel any better.

The Bible is full of stories of God making things better for man. Sometimes it's just the little things: Jonah had a small shrub for a day, which gave him at least a day's respite from the heat of the sun. The Israelites had their manna and quail when they were hungry; not a banquet, but at least they were fed, they were hungry and God provide. But God was active in much bigger things, too: the deliverance from slavery, and from exile: thus did Isaiah prophesy, "then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing." God's ultimate plan for them was to restore what they had lost. And then there are the healings which Jesus performed, and of course, the biggest thing of all, man's salvation. All the pain in the world is nothing compared to being deprived of eternity with God; Jesus fixed that, at a price beyond our imagining. When *we* suffer, it's usually because we have little or no choice; when Jesus suffered, it was not only his choice, it was his choice spurred on by love, spurred on by his love for us. His passion and death was as much pain as man endured, but he endured it, because he knew it was our only hope, that if he didn't overcome the power of death himself, death would hold the power over us for ever. So God makes things better, but why doesn't he make everything better? Even in Jesus' time, not everyone was healed and not everyone was made whole; only those chosen to demonstrate to the world, to us, that Jesus has the power of God because Jesus is God. And today, tragedy and pain continue to plague us, everything isn't all good just yet, because God heals us now, not by robbing us of our freedom so that we cannot sin; rather, he offers to man, with man's free will intact, the graces to overcome

sin by accepting his will, and following his way. And when we accept his offer, it doesn't mean that the strife is over: it means that we see now that the pain isn't pointless, that it's part of a struggle, but part of a struggle which has been won already on the cross. And to share in that cross with it's pain, is to share in the victory as well. The issue now is not whether or not we'll *experience* suffering, but whether or not we'll lose hope over it.

Man still looks to the heavens when tragedies occur; but we, here, are the mystical body of Christ, which means Jesus wants to use us to do his work now, which means that the world will look to us at times to make things better. Consider the reading today from the letter of James, with both the rich man and the poor man coming into the assembly; who do you welcome? James doesn't say to ignore the rich man, but he does say that whatever we do, don't ignore the poor man, don't ignore the man who has come because he is in the midst of his suffering, and is looking for acceptance among us. Everyone is to be welcomed here: everyone, come in out of the rain, come in out of the cold, come in out of the heat; come in out of the infirmities, come in out of the ailments, come in out of the pain and experience relief. James's point which he wants us to take to heart, is that the poor man is the one whom Jesus died for, and so is the rich man; of course, Jesus wants them both here. He wants everybody here. And we, who are already here, have to welcome them. But how welcoming are we, really? I guess it depends on how you define welcoming. I don't turn anybody away, unless of course they disrupt the service; I don't think it's very welcoming to everybody else to have somebody interrupting the service. We don't offer communion to everybody, not because they aren't good enough people, but because we don't think it's very welcoming to ask people to say that they believe something that they don't believe yet, and to receive communion here is to state that you believe every single thing that the Catholic Church teaches. So by all means, everybody come and join us in prayer and song; and when ready to accede to all the teachings of the Church, and live in accord with those teachings, prepare to make the profession of faith and join us in communion. We don't tell people that anything and everything they do is a-okay by God, because it isn't very welcoming to withhold from people God's revelation, and to put their souls in jeopardy so that they'll like us and think we're nice; God's been pretty explicit on what he wants, and doesn't want us to do: I myself felt welcomed into the church by being challenged to change some of my behaviors, and I will always love the Church for telling me what I ought to do to be close to God rather than telling me that everything I was doing was okay.

So here we are, all gathered together with our various tragedies and sadnesses du jour. Some of you out there, maybe rubbing a stubbed toe, some of you breaking inside as you adapt to the loss of a loved one; some of us, trying to make sense of a great big hole in the place where two giant buildings, once teeming with life and excitement, once stood; where soon will stand memorials to the most pointless of losses. The man who was deaf and mute encountered Jesus, and walked away hearing and speaking; hearing and speaking because he had friends who took him to Jesus and begged our Lord to lay his hand on him. But Jesus didn't cure him by merely laying on his hands; he performed a ritual, coupled with a prayer, which caused the man's ears to be opened. Our church is mostly a church of rituals, and sometimes we may not see the point in the rituals. We follow a certain rite because we believe that God wills it, just as Jesus followed a certain rite to enact his cures. And we follow these directives, because in the end, we believe, we hope, we know, that God will make things better, and not against our wills, but with our wills. Welcome everybody you can in to this place, rich and poor, well-dressed and unfashionably dressed, young and old, those full of hope and those filled with despair. Because here, and here alone, can the turmoil of life ever make any sense. Because Jesus is here, and for as much as life may sometimes hurt, Christ will heal.