

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021 B II

Alex tripped on the sidewalk as he was leaving the February parish breakfast. In his 80s, he consented a bit reluctantly to carry a cane but still valued his independence. Barb, a nurse by profession and a disciple by deep conviction, saw him go down, ran out and covered him with her own winter coat, and stayed with him while others called the ambulance. Alex came out of the episode fine after a hospital stay. Perhaps it would not be a Gospel “mighty deed” in the eyes of the world, but by her compassion and care, Barb shared in the sufferings of Jesus by another. Her kindness demonstrated that in weakness, Christ’s prophetic words – *whatever you do for the least, you do for me* – were visibly fulfilled.

Only a few weeks later, I stood by Barb’s ICU bed as she took her final breaths in this life. She had had some troublesome symptoms in the months prior, but no one was ready for this sudden and devastating loss. In weakness, as Barb shared in the sufferings of Jesus in her own body, an unmistakable gift of hope and grace was also present in that room. This too was Christ’s power reaching perfection.

I share that story with the deepest respect and humility, for it illustrates those two aspects of how human weakness calls forth God’s strength. In ourselves, our struggles can unite us to the mystery of the Lord’s cross in trust and a hope that reaches even beyond this life. And for others, their needs and weaknesses of body or soul also draws forth from us the same compassion that we see displayed in three consecutive moments of Jesus’ road to Calvary, captured in the 4th, 5th, and 6th Stations of the Cross – three different ways to share in Christ’s passion. Mary consoles her Son with a mother’s love and a believer’s faith; Simon of Cyrene helps bear the physical burden of the wood; Veronica humanizes the agony of this condemned prisoner by wiping away the sweat and blood from His face, a gesture that cannot change the outcome but does bring love and concern into that moment of contempt and pain.

In St. Paul's writings, the theme of entering Christ's sufferings appears several times. In Colossians, he says: "I fill up in my own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church." In Philippians, he writes: "***I wish to know Christ, and the power flowing from His resurrection; likewise to know how to share in His sufferings by being formed into the pattern of His death.***" And to the Corinthians, as we heard today, he boasts of those weaknesses that allow God's power to support him. For Paul, these were not abstract clichés. We know he was beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, stoned, betrayed by colleagues and slandered by opponents. In a few places, Paul hints at some impairment of his vision, perhaps from that brilliant light radiating from the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. ***Please know that this is not in any way to romanticize or glorify suffering.*** It simply recognizes that in a wounded and imperfect world, suffering will always visit us and others. But it need not defeat or demoralize us; for we belong to the One Who suffered FOR us out of love, so supported by His grace, we can live in that same love, even in suffering.

As we reflect on our nation's independence this weekend, faith reminds us also of our dependence on God. Freedom for a missionary disciple is never simply the liberty to live however we wish, **freedom from** the needs and burdens others carry. Instead, our Christian freedom has been called **freedom FOR** – the liberty to put our faith into action not only in our personal prayer and piety, ***but as a witness to Christ's own compassion for our world.*** Thank you for the ways you do this. As we emerge from these difficult months of COVID, please help us grow this stewardship in our parish and ACC. As with His neighbors in Nazareth, sometimes what He asks may seem like too much for us. All the more do we need the example of people like Barb, who found strength in her faith both to serve and to suffer, and in both to draw near to Jesus, who assures us: "***My grace is sufficient for you; for power is made perfect in weakness.***"