

September 17, 2017 11:00 a.m. St. Catherine of Siena, Portage

Annual Blue Mass honoring all First Responders

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ: As people of faith, we gather together here in St. Catherine of Siena Church on this very pleasant late-summer September morning, to offer our praises to our Saving and Merciful God. But, in addition to giving praise and worship to our Saving God, we more particularly come together to ask God's special blessings on those among us who devote their lives to "saving" others---those who are ready and willing to help save any of us from dangerous or tragic circumstances when they arise; we gather to commend to God's protecting Hand those who, at a moment's notice, leave whatever they are doing or whoever they are with when that "9-1-1" call comes in, to try to save whoever it is who is in trouble.

Today we celebrate our Annual Blue Mass, which is a celebration we've had in place for many years---even before "9/11", as a way to pray with, give thanks for, and to simply recognize all those within our local communities who defend, protect, and serve all the rest of us in the community. We honor all those who, with great courage, self-sacrifice and heroism, stand against those growing acts of violence, motivated by hatred and perpetrated by other human beings, taking place in so many parts of our world, including here in our own homeland; but we also honor all those who respond to the normal natural disasters, accidents, and other criminal activities that take place in our communities every day, with the same level of courage, self-sacrifice and heroism.

And so, may I ask all those here with us this morning who are active, or retired, members of our community's "First Responders": those who serve in our Public Safety personnel, Police, Firefighters, EMTs, or military personnel, active duty, reserve duty or veterans---to please stand so that we can offer you our grateful recognition.....

These are increasingly dangerous times for those who put on any type of uniform of service, not only for those who protect us on foreign lands, but for those who try to "serve and protect" us right here in the homeland. Our own community was deeply impacted twice during this past year. This past December, Officer Colin Rose, a native of our Gull Lake community, serving as a police officer on the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit, was killed in the line of duty.

And in June, Chief Ed Switalski, chief of Comstock Township's Fire and Rescue department, was killed while responding to an accident. May they both rest in peace, and may their families find comfort in this continuing time of grief.

It is right and important that we pray for all First Responders, and that we hold our First Responders in such high regard----because while they are quite aware of the danger they put themselves in when they respond to any emergency, they still do so because of their commitment to protect, defend and safeguard human life wherever, and however, they can.

The Scripture Readings we just heard this morning are the Readings assigned for the 24th Sunday of the Year; however, they could not be more appropriate for this year's Annual Blue Mass, because they speak to us about the very nature of God, namely: God's unconditional Love and His amazing Mercy, for which we all should be most grateful.

That's what Sirach, the Old Testament Wise Person taught us in this morning's First Reading when he said: "*wrath and anger are hateful thing; yet the sinner hugs them tight.*" He reasons that we can't expect God to forgive us if we refuse to forgive our neighbor.

Our Psalm Response today tells us: "*The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion!*" "*He pardons all your iniquities, He heals all your ills; He redeems your life from destruction---He crowns you with kindness and compassion.*" Isn't that wonderfully reassuring? When all is said and done, even in the midst of life's greatest tragedies, we are comforted to know that our God LOVES us----is WITH us----and forgives our sins as a sign of His Love.

However, even as we are reassured of God's Love and Mercy for us, there is another side to God's Word today that is quite a bit more challenging. And that is that our God expects us to treat one another in the same way that He treats us. Our God expects us to love our sisters and brothers in the human family, which includes even those WE call "our enemies"----to love them even as God loves us. And when someone offends us, hurts us, or even attacks us, we are supposed to forgive, as God forgives us.

This morning's Gospel Reading is very challenging for all of us because Jesus is very clear that we need to allow God's Love to s-t-r-e-t-c-h us from our human inclinations, to the point of living according to God's standards of compassion and mercy. Peter poses a question to Jesus---He probably thought that he would

come across to Jesus as extremely magnanimous and generous: *“Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive. As many as seven times?”* And Jesus just said, in effect, “Oh Peter, Peter,....no, not 7 times, but 77 times----777 times-----7,777 times. In other words, as many times as you are sinned against! And that is why Jesus immediately tells this powerful Parable to teach us to forgive rather than turning to hatred, retaliation or violence as a way of resolving problems.

As with all the Parables Jesus told, He is masterful with this one in so clearly making His point that it would be almost impossible to miss the point. As you recall, there were two “scenes” in Jesus’ Parable: in the first part, a servant is unable to pay his huge debt to his King, and so he is about to be sold into slavery, which was the law of the land; BUT he pleads with the King. Notice that he didn’t ask to be freed of his obligation; he only asks for more time: *“Be patient with me and I will pay you back in full.”* What’s amazing and totally unexpected is the King shows incredible generosity of wiping out the debt all together, enabling the servant to walk away free and clear.

In part two, this very same servant is met by a fellow servant who also is in the same boat as this now-debt-free servant had just been. The fellow servant begs for the very same thing he himself had just seconds before begged for:----*“be patient with me and I will pay you back.”* Of course, we all know what happened. Not only was he a jerk to his fellow servant, but he truly destroyed his own life because of his greed. We rightly say to ourselves “how could he be so mean, so blind, so stupid?”

Of course the point Jesus was making was to make it abundantly clear to Peter, and all of us, that forgiveness isn’t just a nice thing to do; not an option for us to consider; Jesus tells us that it is an essential thing to do, and that God expects us to forgive others as He forgives us.

I’m sure we pray the Lord’s Prayer quite often---perhaps even daily. We will pray it together soon in this Mass. Do we mean what we say? Our Father.....Hallowed be thy Name.....Thy Kingdom come.....Give us this day....and forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us. Is that what we really want? Do we want God to forgive us in the very same way that we forgive, or refuse to forgive, those who offend us??? Most of the time, I’d have to say that I would not really want that.

There's absolutely no doubt about it---to forgive others is hard---perhaps the hardest thing that can be asked of us! But, if we refuse, we will only hurt ourselves!

As we all vividly remember, one year ago this past June, our community experienced a terrible tragedy when a man erratically driving a truck, ran over a whole group of bicyclists, killing 4 and badly injuring 5. And of course our First Responders were immediately on the scene, saving some of those lives for sure, and helping to bring comfort to those who died and their families. The innocent victims who were killed were vibrant, healthy, contributing members of society, loved by their families and their communities. And yet, in the midst of all the pain and suffering and emotional trauma that resulted from that horrific incident came an amazing act of forgiveness.

Within a week, Mark Paulick, the son of Larry Paulick, one of the victims who was killed, posted a letter on Facebook to the man who drove the truck, killing his father and 3 others, assuring him of his forgiveness. His letter treats the man with respect, even as he speaks with complete honesty. He expresses how devastating this loss is to him and all his family, and that their lives have been forever changed. Yet, he writes: "I forgive you." He then expresses how difficult this is as he writes: "Please do not (think) this decision is made with relative ease. It has not been easy....I am upset and angry." He concludes by saying that in spite of his anger, as he writes, "I know that my father would not only want me to forgive you, but would also forgive you himself." There was a kind of "catch" to Mark's forgiveness. He did ask for something in return, and that was for this individual to honestly admit his wrongdoing and that whatever happened from that point on in his life, that he would talk about this event with others with the hope of avoiding any similar tragedies in the future. I can't imagine how hard that was for Mark. But I do know that's exactly what Jesus wanted Mark to do. I'd love to think I could do that same thing; I'm honestly not sure.

God loves us unconditionally and His Mercy is everlasting! But God too attaches a kind of "catch". He wants His love for us to motivate us to love our neighbor; He forgives us, so that we in turn will forgive one another. And He sent Jesus, His Son into the world, so that we could actually learn how to love and forgive by coming to know and love Jesus.

This Parable sets the stage for what Jesus was about to do in His suffering and death on the Cross as the way to win forgiveness and salvation to all people for all

time----not just those who loved and believed in God, but those who did not, as well.

That makes Jesus the Ultimate "First Responder". He came into our world---- came rushing into the suffering and death that was taking place, and the separation from God that was growing---and willingly offered Himself as THE antidote to the sin and violence of the world.

And as He was dying on the cross for the salvation of all, among His last words were words of forgiveness: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!*" Nailed to the Cross, Jesus reconciled all the sins humanity had ever, or would ever, inflict on one another. On the Cross, Jesus extended the Hand of God's Forgiveness and reconciliation. On the Cross, Jesus WAS the King who so generously wrote off the entire debt for each of us. But it remains for US to accept what Jesus did, AND to open our hearts to others who hurt us, individually or collectively, and say: "In Jesus' Name, and by the Power of His Grace (for by our own power, we could never do this), " I forgive you!"

That's what enables us to be truly free. And that's when----and only when--- we will find peace, which is ultimately what God wants: for each of us, and for all the world, to live together in peace.

Yes, "*The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.*" And so must we be.