

SACRED HEART, JOLIET

4TH Sunday of Lent.

March 10, 2013

“There is room for you too”

Every time I come to Sacred Heart Joliet, I experience something of the “too much” of God’s boundless and excessive love and generosity. I am therefore reminded of – and truly experience- what Paul celebrates in the letter to the Ephesians 3: 20: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

I am extremely grateful for this check for yet another well (the 9th) from your community to a village in Uganda. Your gifts of water to the children, the women and men in Africa indeed confirm that excessive abundance of God’s household, into which we were all invited through the gift of baptism. How appropriate that you would express gratitude for the gift of your own baptism through a gift of water!

But I am also reminded of another gift that your community provided for the girls of St. Maria Goretti, in the form of a new dormitory, which I am happy to report has been finalized and inaugurated. The dormitory has 12 rooms, each room sleeping 6 girls, for a total of 72 girls. I bring you warm greetings from Sr. Mathias Mulumba, the director, the faculty and staff and all the girls. They asked me to assure you of their prayers for you especially during this time of lent.

On my part, I too would like to thank you for your prayers and well wishes. For since the last time I was here (Nov 27, 2011) two significant events have happened in my life. The first was the celebration of my 25th priestly anniversary, together with five of my classmates. We celebrated this on June 30, 2012 at Kampala. In a retreat before the celebration, Cardinal Wamala reminded us about the gift of the priesthood – the unique gift of God’s friendship: “I no longer call you servants. I call you friends. For I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my father.” Through the celebration and in weeks following the celebration, I kept thinking about this gift of God’s friendship and the so many wonderful friendships it has opened up in my life. I thought about you and your love and support to me. I have some souvenir cards.

The other significant event is that after twelve years, I left Duke at the beginning of December last year to take on a new appointment at the university of Notre Dame. Leaving warm south of North Carolina to the wintry Midwest of South Bend; leaving a Methodist Duke to Catholic Notre Dame – Fr. Ray’s beloved alma Mater (even though I must confess, Ray has a love hate relationship with Notre Dame – and this is not simply because of Manti or their football team!) Anyway, I have been settling in, learning the place, the program and the people. I teach courses at the undergraduate level, but also graduate courses in theology and peace studies and on Catholicism in the global south (Africa). Pray for me.

Through all these events and transitions, I have continued to experience the “infinitely far more” of God’s blessings and support. How about you my friends? When is the last time you experienced the “too much “ of God’s boundless love, friendship and forgiveness. Lent is the time in which God invites us to experience that too much through our journey back “home”.

Thus on this 4th Sunday of lent, the gospel presents us with the story of the prodigal son – or, better, of the forgiving father. We know this story too well! Every time I read the story I am struck by the “infinitely far more” – the scandalous excess of the father in relation to his sons. He sees the young son from a distance and runs (he an old man runs!!!) to meet him. He embraces him (a real tight hug); does not even allow him to finish his apology before he orders him to be bathed, robed not only in new, but purple (royal clothes), a ring on his finger; orders the calf killed, the wine delivered; invites neighbors – and throws this incredible party: “We are going to celebrate”

This is too much!! No wonder the elder son was angry. Who would not? He would have nothing to do with this scandalous and uncalled for debacle. And nothing to do with this family. The young brother is no longer his brother’ – but “this son of yours.” I do not know about you. But I am with the elder son. He has been faithful. He has been loyal. He had done everything right – and not even once has the father ever killed a small goat for him. Like the elder son, I too am scandalized – nay angry. I do not understand what’s going on here. What kind of father is this?

And yet this is what the “too much” of God’s love means. In God’s household (economy) all rules seem to be broken; especially the neat distinctions between who deserves to be rewarded and who deserves to be punished’ who is in and who is out; who is saved and who is condemned; who is righteous and who is a sinner.

There is something totally new, un-derived here: it is the NEW CREATION – which Paul talks about in the second reading: 2 Cor 5: 17-20.

The law abiding, the faithful, righteous have the hardest time understanding “what is going on” let alone being part of this household. How can this prostituting son of gun - who jumped the queue be given such a royal welcome and a party? Where is the sense of justice here?

What the elder son does not yet see that God’s household is about NEW CREATION. And with new creation, there is a strange new sense of justice, where the lost are embraced; the sinner is forgiven; the immigrant & homeless are welcomed home; the lost are received in the warm bosom of the loving God.

Lent is the time not to become more law abiding; It is not the time to become more righteous (self-righteous. It is a time to hear the invitation, “There is room for you too” in this household. Lent is the time to come in; to join the celebration and dance. It is the time to mix with the prostitutes, the sinners, the poor, the prisoners – the lost, whom the Father not only welcomes home, but throws a party. There is room for you too in this crowd.

Everything in this room is too much!! It has too many people, too many undeserving and unclean bodies. It has too much food and wine. There's too much noise and laughter; and yes, too much love. The room is suffused with the "infinitely far more" of New Creation. But – and here is the Good News – There's room for you too in this room. The only condition; the only ticket you need to come in and join the celebration is that you have to be accept to be embraced – not only by the Father; but by all the others in the room before you: the tax collectors, prostitutes, immigrants, homeless, sinners, who have already been embraced by the Father.

Oh, by the way, there is another minor requirement that goes with being embraced – you will need to learn how to cry! In a beautiful sculpture at Duke Divinity School, entitled, "Reconciliation" Margaret Parker, captures this very well. In the sculpture, the younger son is kneeling next to his father, exhausted, worn out. He has his left hand around the father's heart. His ears are filled with tears. The old man is frail, he is not looking at his young son, but his eyes are turned to the elder son, his left arm on his (elder son's folded right hand; his looks to him with pleading eyes, moist with tears. The elder son is a tall, strapping young man in boots, jeans, with his arms crossed, his face looking away. His body is taut, tense, angry, and bitter.

The infinitely far more of God's abundant love and forgiveness is more readily experienced by those who have given up the pretensions of being strong; self-sufficient or tough. That is why Lent is an invitation for us to accept God's embrace, which incidentally opens us up to our own frailty, brokenness and tears. For only when we risk God's embrace, is the truth of our lives revealed to us – namely that we re forgiven sinners, who thanks to God's infinite forgiveness, we are still God's beloved children. If this realization brings us to tears of both pain and humility, it also brings us right in the middle of the celebration and of the too much of God's new creation. To him therefore who is able to forgive our sins and at the same time give us infinitely far more than what we can expect or even imagine, to him be honor , glory and thanksgiving. AMEN.

