

Fourth Sunday after Trinity
June 28, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 5:21-43

As many of you know, my wife, Kristina, will soon deliver our ninth child. In fact, our son is due early next week. In America ours is an extraordinarily large family, but there was a long time in our marriage that there were just the two of us and Jesus. Over almost five years Kristina got pregnant just once, a baby we lost about ten months after we were married in June 1996. Then, for four long years, nothing. In desperation, though I was a Protestant and had never prayed earnestly to the saints in my life, I cried out to our Blessed Mother one morning, “Mary, help me.” Ten months later Clara was born, and since then our Lady has not ceased to help us. She helped us come home to the Catholic Church; She helped us found this parish; and, I’m sure, She will help us found St. Thomas More Parish School.

In a sense, then, desperation played a role in some of the fruits of our ministry. Desperation certainly played a role in the woman’s healing we heard about in today’s Gospel. St. Mark tells us that this woman had been menstruating constantly for twelve years. Under Jewish Law this would have made her ritually unclean and thus unable to participate in Temple worship. The Gospel tells us that in addition to her alienation from her fellow Jews because of her ritual impurity, she had also suffered under the care of many physicians, who hadn’t made her any better. She had spent all of her money seeking a cure, and she was only getting worse. She heard about Jesus and His healing power; so in her desperation she came up behind Him and touched His garments, thinking that if she just touched them she would be healed.

Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, was desperate, too. Not only did he meet Jesus at the shoreline, he threw himself at Jesus’ feet and begged Him to heal his daughter. Later, after he’d been informed that his daughter had died, Jairus continued to follow Jesus, all the way into the room where his dead daughter was. He had no other options if he wanted to see his daughter alive again. Jesus was his only hope, and in his desperate faith that Jesus could help him, Jairus and his wife were witnesses to a miracle. His desperation had become the occasion for his own conversion to faith in Jesus Christ.

This is not the only way, of course, that people come to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We must not all be desperate before we finally turn to Jesus and ask for help because every other avenue has been tried and found wanting. In my own case it was not my desperation that led me into the Church, even if I had in desperation called out to our Blessed Mother. Rather, I read and reasoned and prayed my way into the Church after deliberating for probably too long. So I recognize that we don’t all have to be desperate in order to respond finally to Jesus’ call to us.

But Jairus and the woman in today’s Gospel show us that many people come to Jesus only after they have been completely broken down, only after they have exhausted the other options that came to mind first. When they at last present themselves to the Church, they are like Jairus sprawled out on the ground begging, humbled to such an extent they are willing to tell complete strangers the intricacies of their problems, if only they can get a little—or a lot of—help.

Such situations are both an opportunity for the Church and a potential pitfall. They are an opportunity, obviously, because we are being given the chance to be Jesus to the needy and vulnerable.

Through the Church such desperate people are introduced to the healing power of Jesus Christ, just as Jairus and the woman came to know that power personally. They are also brought into a community that they did not know existed in the form it does, as a family of believers who have all benefited in some way from God's generosity. We have all at one time or another been in their shoes, and we can relate how God used His Church to give the aid we required. When the Church is able to help such desperate souls, they often become the most committed of the Lord's disciples, grateful for God's answer to their prayers.

The pitfall in these solutions comes in two forms. First, when we are confronted with someone in need, someone truly desperate for help, we often lack the courage to give them what they actually need. Everyone knows that giving cash to a drug addict is stupid, but it takes more than a passing glance to figure out who really needs rent assistance and who really needs to go to rehab. For example, the addict genuinely thinks he needs rent money—he isn't lying—but we'll have to spend time with him to show him that his drug money should have been used for his rent. Too often desperate people ask for what they don't need and neglect to ask for what they do.

The second pitfall in addressing the needs of the desperate is that we give them more than they can handle, and in their bewilderment they think the Church has failed them just as everyone else has. For example, it is often the case when I counsel people that I know very quickly what the issues are but, at the same time, know the needy are not ready to hear it. In these cases we must take the time to build trust, because if we give them solid food when they can only digest milk, they're going to choke and then blame us for feeding them. It is better to hold the hand of the desperate in such cases, until such time as they can bear the truth. To hit them with both barrels when they can absorb only one is less than compassionate. It is unloving and will bring disrepute upon the Lord's disciples and the Church we love so much.

The Supreme Court ruling on Friday establishing a constitutional right to same-sex marriage is sure to send desperate people our way, seeking shelter from the storm. If they come to us for help, we will have before us an opportunity if we remember our mission as evangelists who proclaim the Truth in love. Indeed, our school we are founding may have just become that much more attractive to parents who want their children to be such evangelists. But if we are to give the healing they desire, then we must give them the medicine they need, without administering so much at once that it becomes toxic to them. These are perilous times. One wrong word could be very costly. So choose your words carefully, knowing that as we encounter the desperate begging us for help, the healing we want most for them is of the eternal sort. Every word we say must point to heaven, and we will be held accountable if the things we say push the needy towards hell.