

Proclamation of the Gospel

The Lord be with you.
And with your Spirit.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to St. Mark.
Glory to You, O Lord.

A leper approached Jesus with a request kneeling down as he addressed Him. "If you will to do so, you can cure me." he said. And moved with pity, Jesus stretched out His hand, He touched him, and He said, "I do will it. Be healed." And the leprosy left him there and then, and he was cured. Jesus gave him a stern warning, sent him away, "Not a word to anyone now," He said. But go off and show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cure what Moses prescribed in the law. That should be sufficient for them. The man went off and began to proclaim the whole matter freely, making his story public. As a result of this, it was no longer possible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He stayed in the desert places, and yet people kept coming to him from all sides.

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.

Homily by Fr. Gerry Hurley

Another great Gospel as we prepare to move into the Lenten season. Amen? Amen! Absolutely beautiful. And we're still not out of the first chapter of Saint Mark's Gospel. So there are some obvious telltale signs in this reality.

Three times we have experienced the healing of Jesus. The first one, two weeks ago, was in the synagogue where He healed the individual in the synagogue. Then, the second one was coming out of the synagogue. They journeyed to Peter's home. His mother-in-law was ill and He healed her. Now He is going really out to the perimeters. The healing power of Jesus. Think about it. This was the worst affliction in that day and age. To be a leper was the most horrible experience for any individual.

We read about in the First Reading, today. They were isolated. If you have the scabs or the sores you were to live apart from the community. It didn't matter where you grew up, what town or village, you were to live apart. That isolation must've been horrible. It was a terrifying experience for people. Why? Because to touch these people, to even be close to them, denoted a kind of a defilement. Sometimes, a kind of a spiritual defilement. But, a physical defilement in that you could contract the disease as well. So, how significant all of that. And then, the prescriptions of the law. It was well enshrined — you've gotta stay in your colony. You're not welcome out into community. You don't belong. Here he appears in the presence of the Christ. How dramatic.

This is different to the other healings. This is reaching way out beyond. This is certainly a telltale piece of the reality — that Jesus Christ desires for all of His people to be healed. No matter what their ailment. That's why the adage that we've been following is so important. "The Church, often described as a hospital, contains too many patients who fail to get well." You betcha. It's absolutely true in the modern world. Absolutely and totally unequivocally true. And it's true, not because Jesus doesn't want to heal them, but because we don't want to get well. That's the fundamental reason.

It's absolutely clear. Just in the opening chapter of Saint Mark's Gospel — we haven't finished the first chapter yet, and he has shown us all of this healing. In the synagogue first, outside of the synagogue, and then to everybody else — to everybody else who was marginalized or set aside, He has a desire for all of His people to be healed. What a great experience in the telltale details of the story. How did this man get into the presence of Jesus? You know what the law was. You had to ring a bell and shout out, "Unclean! Unclean!" And yet here he is dropping on his knees before Jesus, and the kicker is — how did this man know that Jesus was the source of his healing? How could he have come to that, living in isolation and living in this colony? But he did.

How does anybody come to that, whether they are living in isolation or living in community? But the fundamental teaching is they've got to want it. They've got to desire it. He sure desired it, and he certainly broke many of the conventions to appear in front of Jesus. He drops to his knees. He said, "If you will to do so, I know you can do in me what needs to be done." What a great faith. And then, Jesus says keep it quiet. Don't tell everybody. Why? Because he wanted to be able to continue the building of the kingdom. But, He knew that this would become another distraction to His ministry because people would look for signs and wonders, rather than the proclamation of the kingdom. And that is exactly what happened. So Jesus now can't go publicly into any of the towns and villages because the dramatics are happening. But, Jesus wants a whole lot more than dramatics. He's come to invite people to faith and healing and relationship. Great Gospel. Wow, wonderful parable as we enter the Lenten Season.

We've been following our own parable, yes? Good. And, you have it going someplace or other? Norma and Bridget and the whole firm — the Murphy, Blarney and Bull Company, and their LLC. How in the world to get to LLC? Man, it just defies any kind of logic, you know? How can you just say, well we're going to be limited liability? There's no such thing, really. Show me one place in the Gospel where there's limited liability. It doesn't happen. But, we do those things.

So, the good news is, the parable, our parable — Norma and Bridget and the Murphy, Blarney, and Bull Organization — things are beginning to happen. That's the good news. But, I won't delay on that because I want to get back to the other parable, which is a helpful insight into our own parable. We will journey with it throughout the Lenten experience. Norma and Bridget and the Corporation, and how do things unfold.

But, here is a good insight into it. Paula — you remember last week? And, the rest of you? You do, too? Good. Remember, we talked about Paula. She went on her retreat. It

was a five-day retreat. She was invited to go there by God. There was no question or doubt about that reality. She went there. God moved her to go to this retreat. She had been before. She's a spiritual lady. She arrives at the retreat, and she is one of the first people there. And she sits inside of the retreat center. Sits in the seating area, and she observes the people coming into the retreat. First person coming in, a guy with a guitar. She says this is silent retreat. What's he doing with a guitar? People know you don't bring musical instruments to a silent retreat. And what's more, this is a contemplative trees. It's about the mystics. It's about going deep inside. And she has her little judgment and she says, "Tsk. Tsk. Bringing a guitar."

Then, the second person she sees coming to the retreat — He has two guitars. And he is also managing the largest box of CDs that she's ever seen in her life, and she says these people just don't get it. But, they will learn over the few days, she hopes. And then the third person that comes along is a lady in a long flowing dress, and she announces when she comes into the foyer area that she is a dancer. Paula thinks to herself, nobody comes in a long flowing dress to a retreat, you know. When you come to a retreat, a contemplative silent retreat, you wear sweatpants. And, you kind of hang out and you don't worry too much about makeup and all of the other things. Hey, you're just there to retreat, to withdraw from it all. Maybe she'll find out.

Then, a fourth lady. She observes her when she is out there trying to have quiet. This lady who is also an elder lady on the retreat, she just walks around the house kind of voraciously. Kind of real intense. Paula thinks, what is she doing? If she wanted to take a walk, there's some beautiful walks around here, down by the lake, out in the woods. And so she has spent three days on a retreat, now. She has been angry, resentful of these people who don't know how to do it. And she knows how. She has spent three days there, and she is extremely discontent. So, I asked you at the end of that then, Paula now goes off on a long walk for herself. And, I asked you, what are the possibilities of redeeming this retreat? It's a five-day retreat. She has spent three days and lost all three days. How can she bring forth some real goodness from this retreat experience? Can God break through that austere disposition? Can God break through that austere disposition? Yes. Yeah? He could. Will He? Does He?

Only if invited. Extremely important piece. God is not gonna break through it unless He is invited. It's a key ingredient. Will God break through her experience? What is it gonna take to change your attitude, her perspective? And I asked you the final question — What if you are her advisor? What advice do you give her besides go home? I hope you had a chance to reflect on it during the week. So, what you think happened in her retreat? She has this great judgment of all of these people who are coming to retreat. She's not able to get beyond herself. She is afflicted with a poverty of spirit. So what do you think happened?

Let me tell you a few more details about Paula before I give you that answer. Paula — she certainly is afflicted with a struggle and being critical and judgmental. It could happen to any of us. Paula is a serious seeker of God in her life. He is the one who has led her to this retreat. Paula has written a great deal about God, and about relationship

with God in her life. And 20 years before this, she and her husband and daughter were in a terrible accident. And her husband and daughter were killed in that accident by a drunk driver. And she was three months pregnant at that time. This is many years after the fact still. She's written a lot at this particular point in time. She's one of the most prolific writers in the Christian experience, really. One of my favorite writers because she writes out of such a great depth of what it means to experience God. It's a little scary to think that she was really deep into the spiritual life, and these demons could still come to the fore. That's a little scary.

When we think we're pretty far along in the journey, and we have some of this under control, and these demons show up. She had written a great deal. She had written some of her best work, in my opinion. She has probably 19 different books out. But she written one of the great ones — I gave a copy of it to the staff last year for Christmas — *The Gift of the Redbird*. Powerful, powerful book that relays some of this. Then she wrote a book later following this experience — *Seeing With New Eyes* — that's what this is about. How can she see this experience of retreat with new eyes, and not just through the old framework? *The Gift of the Redbird* is really a good gift.

So, what happened in her retreat? Listen to her own telling of it. Her name is Paula D'Arcy — —

For the three days at the beginning of that retreat, — which caused my daughter once to say it's a good thing it was a five-day retreat, I found myself looking with a set of eyes that were only looking out of my own need — out of my own place. How is this affecting me? It is not affecting me well. I do not like this. This is uncomfortable for me.

*I went that afternoon and I took a really long walk. When I came back, the second guitar player who was always in the yard, was crouched down and he was looking at something. So I crept up behind him because he stopped playing. And I looked at what he was watching, but as my eye fell down to him on the ground, I glanced into his guitar case. You couldn't make this up. This is a true story. And inside his open guitar case, I saw a copy of my book, *Gift of the Redbird* and I softened at that moment.*

He couldn't be that bad. I mean, at least he had great taste in literature. And what he was looking at was a big boxer, a big dog that for some unknown reason had a large chain around his neck and was pulling a tire. And I looked at his eyes, and I realized in one glance that he saw in that dog some metaphor for his own life. That there was some really heavy weight obviously that he was pulling, and that it hurt.

For the first time, I started to look at that community with a different set of eyes. And I went back into my room and I wondered. I wondered what was hurting this man. And I thought, I wanted to leave something for him in his room just to be part of a presence that said, "I know you're there and you're hurting." So I got back with my blanket and hiked back downtown. And I search this little town in Indiana until I found a card store where there was, in fact, a little redbird tacked onto a card. And I went back and I

knew where he was. I knew he wasn't in his room. He was outside singing. And I went back into his pillow, and I just pinned that little bird onto the pillow.

I had been avoiding for the first three days of the retreat going to the times of centering prayer because they were also noisy and I didn't want to be in the same room with them. Now I was looking in a different way.

And so I went to centering prayer that afternoon, and I keep my eyes open while everyone else's eyes were shut. And I noticed that the guitar player in the room next to me wept hard all through the centering prayer, and I thought something also in his life is painful. And I took petals that were falling from the roses on the altar after centering prayer was over. I didn't know what else to do, and I went and I just put them across the threshold to his room. And I thought maybe in some way he'd get a message when he left his room the next time that something beautiful was also present in life.

I started looking around and I watched the lady that was pacing. And I went back down to the same card store, and I found a bookmark that had what I thought was a pretty poem on it. And I left that on her doorstep.

I found a young girl who was there who always was sitting alone out of the yard. She looked so forlorn. I went back to the same store — they loved me at the store. I found the tiniest little orange teddy bear, and I went and I put that on the threshold to her room. And after I had left the little red bird on the guitar player's pillow, a note was slipped under my door the next morning which said, "Why did God send you a Redbird, and all I got was a boxer?" And it pulled me.... pulled me into that community.

And that afternoon, as I was wrapping up in blankets to go out for another walk, I open the door and I found that someone had gone down to the local Target Store and had bought me a pair of sweatpants, and put a note on the sweatpants saying, "I noticed how cold you were." And, I thought how unbelievably kind.

And for the rest of the hours of that retreat I could not eat a meal, I could not go to centering prayer, I could not look at anybody without weeping. Because I now was looking from a different place. Which I think is essentially what we're talking about. That there's a way that we see when we we're young — and we have to see that way when we're young — because it's part of the journey. We see in the way that's all about us, and how we relate to this world. And we try to find a routing, and a grounding, and a footing.

But now, something, some corner had been turned. And now I'm looking in a way that looks at the other. I kept watching these people and thanking them, thanking them, for being obviously the perfect community. Because they revealed me to myself. They showed me the size of my judgment. They showed me the size of my loving, the stinginess of it. They taught me profoundly.

At the end of that week, I didn't think I would ever find a more beautiful group of people.

The last time that we met for centering prayer, as it got very still and quiet, right in the middle of the centering prayer, the dancer broke into song, herself. It was the most musical retreat. And I caught myself thinking, at first, "My God, she is breaking the silence. And now she, too, is singing."

She had a beautiful voice. And when the two guitar players heard her voice, they whispered to her afterwards, and in the afternoon they all three were together singing. And yet I thought, in some way, you know this too has purpose. I had to check the initial judgment that said, "Oh my God, one more thing spoiled."

When that retreat ended, we all gathered together. The guitar player who had met in the yard was the first person to approach me. He said to me, "Do you know what I was doing all week as I was playing my guitar out in the yard?" I said, "No, I have no idea. Composing new music, I guess." And, he said, "Well, I had read your book, Gift of the Redbird. I tried to act like I didn't know that. I said, "Oh, really?" Very casually, "How wonderful!" He said, "Actually, something in it touched a burden that I'm bearing, and all week I was composing a song for you."

Then the guitar player who had been in the room next door to me came to me and said, "Will you return at this time next year?" And, I said, "I don't know. My schedule doesn't always allow it." He said, "I hope you do." He said, "You know what my prayer is for myself if I come back next year? And I said, "What would that be?" And he said, "To be able to have the courage to come without my guitar. But this year, the best that I could do was to come with this instrument in between me and what I was facing."

And then, I had a conversation with the woman who had driven me nuts for three days as she walked the perimeter of the house. And she said to me, "I took the biggest step of the last 10 years this week." And I said, "What was that?" She said, "Well, I have suffered all these years from agoraphobia. I've been unable to leave my home. And I made the tremendous step of coming to this retreat. And the best that I could do was to take myself one foot from this house and walk outside every day. But, I did it."

But, they weren't done with me yet. Because then, the dancer came and found me. And she said to me, "Do you remember the moment in centering prayer when I sing out loud?" And again, I'm terrible! I tried to make like it was — yeah, I think I do remember that. It obviously wasn't a big thing for me. — And she said, "That was such a step for me. Because I'm trying to learn at this point in my life to give full expression to who and what I most deeply am. And I felt a song in the middle of that deep prayer, and I just allowed myself to sing it. And I was afraid of the judgment of everyone in the room, but you!"

God, this is our journey. It is our journey of love.

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