

**Homily - 13th Sunday, Year "B" –  
St. Monica's: 27-28 June 2015**

**Wisdom 1:13-15,2:23-24-** "God made us not for death, but immortality."

**Psalms 30:** "God turns our mourning into dancing: I will praise you Lord, you have rescued me."

**2 Corinthians 8:7-15** - Jesus Christ became poor for our sake, that by his poverty we might share in his riches.

**Mark 5:21-43** - The healing of Jairus' daughter, and of the woman with hemorrhages. "Daughter, your faith has made you well." "Do not fear, only believe." "The child is not dead, but sleeping." "Little girl, get up!"

Like many of you, I was shocked to hear the news last week of the killing of nine innocent people – all African-Americans – attending a Bible study at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. At a memorial service for their pastor (and South Carolina state Senator) **Reverend Clementa Pinckney** this past Friday, President Obama spoke eloquent and powerful words to that congregation – and to the world – about the witness of this pastor, of the members of his flock, of the church:

Clem was often asked why he chose to be both a pastor and a public servant. As our brothers and sisters in this church know, we don't make those distinctions. "Our calling," Clem once said, "is not just within the walls of the congregation, but...the life and community in which our congregation resides." He embodied the idea that our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the "sweet hour of prayer" actually lasts the whole week long ... that to put our faith in action is more than individual salvation, it's about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.

What a good, good man. You don't have to be of high station to be a good man. Preacher by 13. Pastor by 18. Public servant by 23. What a life Clementa Pinckney lived. What an example he set. What a model for his faith. And then to lose him at 41 -- slain in his sanctuary with eight wonderful members of his flock, each at different stages in life but bound together by a common commitment to God. Cynthia Hurd. Susie Jackson. Ethel Lance. DePayne Middleton-Doctor. Tywanza Sanders. Daniel L. Simmons. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton. Myra Thompson. Good people. Decent people. God-fearing people. People so full of life and so full of kindness. People who ran the race, who persevered. People of great faith. To the families of the fallen, the nation shares in your grief. Our pain cuts that much deeper because it happened in a church. The church is and always has been the center of African-American life, a place to call our own in a too often hostile world, a sanctuary from so many hardships.

Over the course of centuries, our churches have served as harbors where slaves could worship in safety; as houses of praise where their free descendants could gather and shout Hallelujah; as rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; as bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places of praise and worship; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way, and told that they are beautiful and smart, and taught that they matter. That's what happens in church.

As we gather in church today, what word of hope is spoken to us by the Gospel, by God's living Word? As we encounter Jesus, who goes about preaching, teaching, healing, and doing good, what impact do his words, his deeds, his very presence, have on us? Are they just words on a page, stories from the past? Or do we trust and believe in their inner power: their capacity to transform our own minds, hearts, and lives; their invitation to effect real transformation and growth in our communities, our nations, in the world? As Pope Francis insists in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, our praise at the beauty of creation is incomplete if it does not lead us to a firm and lasting commitment to care for the earth as our common home, as a place of belonging for all cultures and creeds, for every nation and every generation.

The faith of Jairus, the faith of the woman in the crowd who reached out her hand to touch the hem of Jesus' garment in hope of a healing, invite us to examine our own faith. How do we see Jesus? We believe in him as Son of God. We recognize in him a great religious and moral teacher. Hopefully, we also believe that the Gospels truthfully report his wondrous deeds: how he fed the hungry, forgave sinners, cast out the demons, healed the sick and raised the dead to life. We believe Jesus changed people's lives - 2000 years ago.

But what about today, right here, right now? Do we seek Jesus out, approach him with our own needs for healing, for peace, for justice - not just my personal needs, but of those I love, the needs of our struggling church and our broken world? Like the disciples in the storm-tossed sea, we question whether God really cares; is Jesus simply asleep at the helm as we suffer and struggle? Or do we know Christ as one who heals, inspires, and challenges us, inviting us to a living and active faith, hope and love?

As Catholics, we are accustomed to gathering for Sunday Eucharist. You don't need a doctorate in sociology to notice that attendance at Sunday worship has declined sharply over the past 40-50 years. There are all kinds of reasons for this, but it seems to me that the only way of reversing this trend is to foster a deeper appreciation of the relation between three fundamental building-blocks for growth in the Christian life: personal experience, sacred scripture, Eucharist.

We are called to live reflectively and prayerfully, taking our personal experience seriously, inviting God into our daily lives. We are invited to engage with the Gospel of Christ, allow his word to cast its light on our lives: helping us explore new possibilities, unmasking the shadowy areas, calling us to growth and conversion. Then, we bring all of this to the Eucharist: more deeply aware of that for which we give thanks and praise, more fully conscious of the areas where we need a fresh dose of God's healing and transforming love. In other words, we can only get something **out of** the Eucharist if we are willing to bring something of ourselves **to** the Eucharist.

One way of doing this is to practice what some traditions call "lectio divina", or others, "Ignatian contemplation": imaginatively entering into the heart of the Gospel: setting the scene, connecting with the experience of those who encounter Jesus, allowing ourselves to be present to Jesus' words and actions, and trusting in his desire to touch us and speak to us today.

For example, consider today's Gospel. Spontaneously, to whom do you relate in this story? Which of these characters speaks to your reality, your joys, your struggles? What is Jesus saying to you through them?

***Am I Jairus – or his wife?*** *We don't know what to believe about Jesus. But our daughter, whom we love more than life itself, is at death's door. The doctors can't do anything, and we are besides ourselves. We feel so helpless, and there is nowhere to turn. But Jesus is here today. He agrees immediately to come to our home. He says: "Of course, I'll come with you. Of course I care. Don't be afraid. Only trust." It seems hopeless, but we will try. Maybe our little one will recover, after all.*

**Are you the suffering woman?** For twelve long years, I have been suffering, my life, all my savings, literally bleeding away. I have become an outcast. My people believe that this flow of blood is life flowing out of me, a curse which is contagious. Everyone stays away. But this Jesus seems to be different. I am so tired of living this way. I know it's against the Law, but if only I could touch this Jesus, even the hem of his robe, it might make a difference. As I feel the bleeding stop, I hear Jesus asking: "who touched me?" I am afraid. Should I just slip away into the crowd? But I must tell him the truth. At least, I have to thank him. But Jesus is not angry. He lifts me up - he touches me - he calls me "daughter". "Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed," Jesus says.

**Are you someone in the crowd?** I like to follow Jesus - but always at a safe distance. It feels right to be near Jesus, and I am fascinated by what he has to say, by seeing what he is able to do. I get close enough for that. And yet, I've never really interacted with Jesus, gotten close enough to speak with him, to ask him for advice, to share my struggle, my need for healing. Part of me looks down at those people who are so helpless, that they fall down at Jesus' feet and implore his help. I'm too proud for that. But part of me envies them; Jesus seems somehow closer to them, more part of their lives. Will I ever get up the courage to go up to Jesus myself? In the meantime, I stand here on the sidelines, taking it all in, hoping that one day, I'll get close enough.

**Are you the little girl?** My parents love me very much, but who am I? Where do I belong? I have been sick so long, it's hard to hold on to my will to live. I don't even have the strength to pray for myself anymore, I'm so tired. But I can feel the prayers of the people around me, all those who want me to get better, my parents especially. I am falling into a deep, deep sleep. Will I ever wake up? But then I feel someone touch my hand, gently, firmly; I hear a voice, telling me very simply, talitha koum, "get up". All of a sudden, I want to get up, I want to live. I am hungry: for the first time in months, I have an appetite. My life has been given back to me, and now I want to grow up, I want to experience all that life has to offer. And all this because one day, Jesus came to my house.

We are, in fact, all of these people. The same Jesus, who spoke these words and healed the sick two thousand years ago, desires to speak to us today. What is my need for healing? Is it a physical ailment, an emotional difficulty, a spiritual crisis? Is it my own struggle, or that of a spouse, parent, child, sibling, neighbor, friend? Is it the struggle of a people, a nation, an oppressed minority, for recognition and acknowledgement?

Whatever it may be, God cares. Jesus calls me out of the crowd, desires to encounter me, to heal me, to strengthen me, to tell me: "Do not be afraid; only trust"; to lift me up and say, "my child, your faith has made you well, go in peace." This is not magic. It is the power of the living God. It is the love of God, active in us and through us. It is this saving encounter between our lives and the word of God, that we offer at the Eucharist today.

At his eulogy in Charleston, President Obama acknowledged the pain of the families who had lost loved ones, the pain of that church community decimated by violence. But he also spoke of the power of **grace** to overcome and heal these wounds:

*We do not know whether the killer of these innocent women and men knew the history of our church, of our people. But he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act. It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress. An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin.*

*Oh, but God works in mysterious ways. God has different ideas. He didn't know he was being used by God. Blinded by hatred, he could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group -- the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court -- in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness. He couldn't imagine that. Blinded by hatred, he failed to comprehend what Reverend Pinckney so well understood -- the power of God's grace.*

*This whole week, I've been reflecting on this idea of grace. The grace of the families who lost loved ones. The grace that Reverend Pinckney would preach about in his sermons. The grace described in the hymn we all know: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see. According to Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. Grace.*

*As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we've been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned this grace, with our rancor*

*and complacency, our short-sightedness and fear of each other, but we got it all the same. He gave it to us anyway. He's once more given us grace. But it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and to prove ourselves worthy of this gift.*

*That's what I've felt this week -- an open heart. That is what's called upon right now, what writer Marilynne Robinson, calls "that reservoir of goodness, beyond what we are able to do each other in the ordinary course of things." That reservoir of goodness. If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change.*

*The Rev. Clementa Pinckney found that grace.*

*Cynthia Hurd found that grace.*

*Susie Jackson found that grace.*

*Ethel Lance found that grace.*

*DePayne Middleton-Doctor found that grace.*

*Tywanza Sanders found that grace.*

*Daniel L. Simmons, Sr. found that grace.*

*Sharonda Coleman-Singleton found that grace.*

*Myra Thompson found that grace.*

*Through the example of their lives, they've now passed it on to us. May we find ourselves worthy of that precious and extraordinary gift, as long as our lives endure. May grace now lead them – and us - home.*

*Amen!*