"My spirit rejoices in God my savior."

Those words from today’s Gospel resonate in my heart as I reflect on God’s goodness in bringing me so unexpectedly to this day. It is overwhelming to know of the prayers that are being offered for me this afternoon — and for this local Church as we together strive to make the Lord’s love and mercy known in this part of his vineyard.

Our Gospel today, as well as the feast that we celebrate, helps us to focus on God’s extravagant love for the lowly, the little ones. It’s beyond anything that Mary or Elizabeth, sensing new life surprisingly within them, could have imagined. It’s beyond anything that the simple children of Fatima — Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco — could have ever imagined. Our God is indeed a God who surprises us with his love, sustains us with his love, challenges us with his love — it’s a love that changes everything.

In one of my favorite churches in Rome, the Chiesa Nuova — only in Rome could a church that’s 400 years old be known as the “new church” — hangs a painting by the Renaissance master, Federico Barocci, that depicts the moment of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth that we heard about in the Gospel this afternoon. As Mary, carrying Jesus within her, gently touches the arm of Elizabeth, a brilliant light breaks into a world that is otherwise dark, lackluster and undefined, the world that has long been waiting for God to fulfill his promise. Barocci clearly understood what Mary proclaimed: We have a God who loves the lowly and indeed exalts them. God’s love is the game changer.

The Scriptures remind us how much God loves to make his power shine through our weakness. You’ll remember how he whittles down Gideon’s army from 3,200 to 300, so that it would be clear that the victory that they would win was the result not of their might, but of his providential care. Or who could forget the scene where Samuel is called to anoint one of Jesse’s sons and has to pass over the strong
and mature in favor of the youngest, David, no more than a lad. When they go into battle with the Philistines, it’s David — diminutive, inexperienced, ill-equipped David — whom the Lord uses to show his might.

It’s no accident that when Jesus sends his disciples out two-by-two, he sends them out without even a walking staff, or a bag, or money or a change of clothes. (I suspect that in 2016 the command would be “without cellphone, Internet, legal counsel, PayPal and Uber.”) The Lord wants it to be clear that it’s not our things, our degrees, our resources that make the difference — but only him, only Jesus.

Over the course of the past 11 months, I’ve come to believe that God the Father is calling us as a Church to let go of everything other than Jesus. The circumstances in which we find ourselves have left us humbled and exposed, and at times the object of public scorn and reproach. The bonds of communion that have long been the strength of this local Church have been tested and challenged as we come to grips with our past and strive to make plans for the future.

I consider it a great blessing that so many of you have recognized this moment as an opportunity for us to place our trust more completely in the Lord who has “shown his mercy from age to age,” and have called me to embrace, rather than resist, the purification that gives us the opportunity to be the Church that Christ desires us to be, the Church that Pope Francis calls us to be — that evangelizing Church, that “poor Church for the poor,” the Church of the Lucias, Jacintas and Franciscos of the world, the Church that is the field hospital for those in pain.

It’s been a blessing for me that I so consistently find our laity, our consecrated brothers and sisters and our clergy to be proclaimers of hope who are willing to embrace sacrifice so that with our archdiocesan patron, St. Paul, we might “delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties” knowing that it is when we are weak that we are strong (2 Cor 12:10) and believe that we can “do all things through him who gives us strength” (Phil 4:13).

In the listening sessions last fall, the faithful who gathered consistently shared their hope for a Church that is more transparent, more accountable, more collaborative, more reconciling, more engaged in the work of evangelization. I’m all in — but like you, I recognize that we’re going to have success only to the extent that we can stay focused on Jesus, and only Jesus, and embrace his call to humility and simplicity and finding him as we serve those most in need. We’re blessed to have this glorious Cathedral on Summit and Selby, but we can’t ever lose the passion and focus of those pilgrims to the northland who first brought the faith to Pig’s Eye. If they, by God’s grace, could build, I’m confident that we, by that same grace, can rebuild.
As you’ve probably realized already in these past 11 months, the Lord has once again set the stage for the victory to be clearly his. He’s given you a shepherd with more than his share of faults and failings, a shepherd who still has so much to learn about this local Church and region and its history and its culture, a shepherd who has never eaten lutefisk, a shepherd whose feet don’t even reach the ground when he sits on the cathedra. But with your help, your prayers, and especially with God’s grace, I’m confident that we can together begin the process of healing, of evangelizing, of reconciling — of rebuilding, brick by brick, stone by stone.

The commemorative card that you have received today bears a portion of a prayer composed by Blessed John Henry Newman, a prayer that I learned from the sisters of our soon-to-be-saint, Mother Teresa of Kolkata. I hope that you will take it home and allow it to touch your heart as it has touched mine. May it be our fervent prayer this day and always: “Dear Jesus, help me to spread thy fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with thy spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may be only a radiance of thine. Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but ONLY JESUS.”