

Welcome, everyone, on this Third Sunday of Lent. During this season, we are focusing especially on prayer. Of course, prayer is something that you hear a lot about at church, I hope, but sometimes we assumed too much and don't start at the beginning, which is a disservice. We know we are supposed to pray, we know that it is a part of discipleship, but what does that mean? How do we begin and develop a life of prayer? What if we find it difficult? That is a natural, common feeling, so don't worry if you have those questions. Part of our mission as a parish is to teach and guide us in fostering a growing prayer life. That is why this weekend, we are again hosting our Prayer Fair after Mass today in the Social Hall/Community Room, and I hope you can take the time to stop by, grab some pizza, and learn about the many prayer ministries we have here at the parish that are designed to help you start and develop a life of prayer.

In the last lines of today's gospel, of St. John's account of the cleansing of the Temple, we are told that Jesus knows us perfectly. "While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well."

There's a negative aspect to that, of course. Jesus did not need anyone to tell him about human nature, in particular, our fallen human nature. He himself knew it well, which is why he did not trust himself to us. But also consider that Jesus understood our fallen nature, he knew us well, and he chose to die for us, so much did he love us and did he love his Father. Let me make that more personal. Jesus understands *your* fallen human nature, your weakness and sinfulness, and he chose to die for you, so much does he love you.

And it is with that love that he reaches out to you, in your brokenness and suffering. Our sins and poor choices in life do not mean that we can't approach Jesus in prayer. That's a common misunderstanding. We think that if we have done something wrong, committed some sin of which we are ashamed, that we have cut ourselves off from God and cannot go to Him in prayer, that He will not listen to us. That's not the truth at all; far from it.

Jesus yearns to enter into a dialogue with us, to show us that when we come to him and open our hearts to him, we will not find judgment and condemnation; we will find love and an invitation to grow into deeper communion with our loving savior. Whatever our current relationship with God, whatever our current relationship with the Church, Jesus invites us and encourages us to come to him and experience that life-giving relationship for which we thirst.

But like with all invitations, it requires a response on our part. The door is always open, but we have to walk through it. We must make the decision to be open to that dialogue with God, and put ourselves in a place where we remove the walls that we build around our hearts in order to protect them, and let Christ enter into our hearts.

Let's face it: that can be a very difficult step to take. We can grow comfortable with the way things are, even if we know that the way things are is not the best. The Hebrews in today's first reading were led out of slavery in Egypt, and now they are given the Ten Commandments. Here we go. They trust the Lord and follow His servant Moses into the unknown, and now there's a bunch of rules to follow. Typical.

We, too, can be afraid of what we will find, how we might be called to change, if we go on this journey and invite Christ into our hearts. What rules are there going to be? What comfort might we be called to give up? What sacrifices might we be called to make? What if I'm not ready to make the changes I'm afraid I'll have to make if I enter into this dialogue with Jesus, to be the person I know I am called to be? Isn't it better to just not take that step in the first place, to keep our heads down and the walls up?

These are natural fears and completely understandable, but they're mostly in our heads. They are the things that we tell ourselves in order to convince ourselves that it's better to just not walk through that door, but I've never heard someone say that they were happier *before* they started to pray, that they wished they had *less* of a relationship with Jesus. Those fears are not our friend. We will not regret letting Christ into our hearts and developing our relationship with him through prayer.

I hope you are able to take a few minutes and come after Mass to see the different ways that our parish offers to help you take your next step in your prayer life. Accept the invitation that Jesus extends to you to grow closer to him in prayer, and discover the great love and compassion that he has for you.