

HOMILY by Deacon Jason Downer, S.J.

For March 14th – 15th

When I was about 8 or 9 my family went to visit my aunt and cousins who lived in New Jersey for summer vacation. I was very excited because we were going to spend a day at the beach. Growing up in upstate New York I was only used to lakes. So the big day arrives and we go to the beach and I remember being struck by how big the ocean was compared to any body of water I had ever seen. After we put all our stuff down, my cousins said “we’re gonna jump the waves”. That sounded like a lot of fun, the waves weren’t that big, this was gonna be easy. So we go out, maybe 5 or 6 feet away from the beach, the water is still only up to my chest at this point. The first wave comes and my cousins say “get ready”. I planted my feet firmly on the sand floor and was ready to propel myself over the approaching wave. Well...that didn’t work. Nobody told me I wasn’t supposed to be standing because the wave just took my legs out from under me and slammed me down. I tried to get up and another wave hit me from the back. I’m not having fun at this point. The current was so strong that it’s hard to stand up...until one of my older cousins just grabbed me and brought me to the shore so I could catch my breath.

I was reminded of that sensation this week. I felt like I was being hit with wave after wave of information and anxiety over the coronavirus: Boston College closing campus for the remainder of the semester and having classes on-line, stock market plummeting, sports being cancelled, Tom Hanks testing positive for it. Every time I tried to catch my breath another wave of news would come and knock me back down. Then we start hearing of dioceses around the country cancelling Masses. In times of trial and joy, I have counted on being able to come together with a community to mourn or celebrate around the Eucharist, and suddenly found myself forced to consider what I would do without this touchstone.

All of these things that hit me, and maybe some of you, like waves *are* important things to pay attention to. Our faith is inherently communal and at this specific time, the communal aspect of faith means protecting the most vulnerable in our society. If that means that we don’t gather for classes, or a celtics game, or even Mass then that *is* part of living our faith, promoting the common good.

We can accept these waves by not letting them take our legs out from under us. We can accept whatever news is coming because we hope in God. As St. Paul said today “The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” This love helps us admit that we *might* be afraid so we can turn to those who are strong. This love helps us reach out to those in need. This love helps us acknowledge the realities of the ever changing situation but doesn’t let us be overcome by them.

I want to end with a recently written poem by Lynn Ungar in response to our current context and the significant life changes each of us have been and will continue to be asked to make in response to it. I think it names important truths for us as people of God during this time of unknowing:

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.
And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another’s hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.

Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.

Reach out all the tendrils

of compassion that move, invisibly,

where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--

for better or for worse,

in sickness and in health,

so long as we all shall live.