HOMILY – 25th Sunday – Cycle B – St. Dennis Church

Two things come to mind as I preach this farewell homily. First, during his pastoral visit to Hungary last week, Pope Francis mentioned that homilies should be limited to ten minutes. I couldn’t think of a better way to leave, while seeing smiles on all your faces, than to do just that. So, when ten minutes is up, the best singer in the assembly has permission to stand and begin singing Mozart’s ALLELUIA. *Speaking into my iPhone: “Hey Siri! Set a timer for 10 minutes.*

Second, I thought I would construct my farewell homily like a Pauline letter to one of the small faith communities he founded. So, here goes!

Paul, a priest of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the holy ones and faithful followers of Christ in Galena, grace to you and peace from God our merciful Father.

I give thanks to God for the graces I received the past four years traveling from Clayton to Corinth, (oops, I mean Galena) to renew faith with you in Jesus Christ. In preaching his gospel and celebrating his dying and rising in the Eucharist with you, I have come to claim him more as my savior and to love you more as fellow sinners who embrace his call to grow daily in our vocation to claim the divine grace to be missionaries of mercy.

Divine mercy is what separates the just from the wicked. Many times, in our faith journey we are caught between these two groups. The words of the first reading from the Book of Wisdom, are spoken by the wicked. The words speak hostility toward the one who calls himself a “child of the Lord.” The wicked have disdain for the patient and gentle ways of the just. They try to wear them down with their default weapons – violence, cruelty, insults. When these don’t work, they condemn the innocent to a shameful death, to see if God will take care of him. We know the end of this story. On a cross and in a tomb, God did not leave his innocent son alone. In the Resurrection God became a caregiver. His final word in the life of his son was not wicked, but life-giving.

Recently, I saw a tee-shirt advertised in a midsummer catalog. The words on the shirt said: **I had my patience tested. I’m negative.** That’s our DNA when we allow the wicked voices to infect us. Our vaccine as Catholics is the Eucharist. In the words of St. Augustine: “after we eat a blessing, we become a blessing.” The message on our tee-shirts then read: **I had my patience tested. I’m super-positive.**

In the second reading, St. James puts a different spin on wickedness and wisdom. He targets envy and selfish ambition as the source of evil behaviors in the community. These are roadblocks toward growing into the spiritual practice of living by “wisdom” from above. People rooted in divine wisdom value the good will of all over personal opinions and peace over divisiveness. Instead of being at “war” *with each other,* St. James wants the baptized to wage war on their inner cravings, passions and disagreements which are tearing the community apart. For James, the spiritual vaccine for their secular woes is to pray for divine guidance. If their prayers are going unanswered, its because they are praying for the wrong things.

In the gospel reading from St. Mark, Jesus practices his brand of divine wisdom by deepening the understanding of his disciple’s earlier discussion about worldly importance:

(a.k.a. ego boasting). He teaches them something radically different. Jesus’ understanding of gospel greatness will stretch their puny understanding of greatness. As a good teacher he deflects attention away from himself by placing a child in the midst of his disciples and embraces it. This action must have surprised them, for in this patriarchal world children were seldom noticed, much less used as examples of how adults can grow in spiritual wisdom. As disciples, the Master is teaching them a new a “discipline,” namely, their relationship with him grows through their encounters with others. They will discover him and the one who sent him hiding in those they regularly ignore or judge as “unimportant.” We don’t grow in this kind of wisdom through books or therapy sessions. We gain it through experience and what we do with that experience that triggers new inner desires to acquire pieces of divine wisdom.

So, here is a short story from the book of my life about how the inner child in me was awakened in adulthood to a new desire for pieces of divine wisdom.

*The year was 1986. I was in graduate school at The Catholic University of America. I had become friends with the Bellanti family from the parish where I assisted on weekends. At the time Dr. Bellanti was chief of Pediatric medicine at Georgetown University Hospital. On one occasion Jackie Bellanti invited me to a dinner party at their home. Thinking that most of the guests were from the medical community, I thought I should dress up for the occasion. So, I wore my best black suit, Roman collar, a shirt with French cuffs, noticeable cuff links and highly polished shoes. Jackie met me at the front door, escorted me to the patio, and pointed out the open bar. As I was enjoying the refreshment of a gin and tonic, a noble looking gentleman approached and asked if I was the Bellanti’s parish priest. I began my tale of being their friend, in graduate school at CUA, studying with some great theological minds like Avery Dulles, David Powers, Fr. John Ford, Sr. Mary Charles Bryce, and the great catechetical scholar, Berhard Marthaler. After about ten minutes of this self-focused resume boasting, Jackie came up behind me with a tray of appetizers and ever-so-innocently, said, “Oh! Fr. Mast, I see you have met Dr. Jonas Salk.” Instead of appetizers I found myself eating humble pie.*

A scientist who profoundly affected the quality of my childhood life with the discovery of the polio vaccine was ever so humble. His DNA for not drawing any attention to himself got out of him and into me. At that moment, I was awakened to a new desire for some of his humility. That was a moment when spiritual wisdom became a spiritual desire for me.

Today is Catechetical Sunday. Shortly we will have a blessing over the parish catechists. They are adults who must always be aware of their inner child who helps them embrace new desires for growth in faith awakened in them by Jesus, the source of all spiritual wisdom. The theme is: **Say the Word, and my soul shall be healed.** The word has a name, JESUS, and when we speak it, as beggars for the gift of divine wisdom, then our wounded heart and soul is open to divine healing.

Amen.