

“O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure...”

Collect and compassion

This collect appointed for today’s service sets the tone for us today at St. James. It acknowledges the almighty power of God—but shines a light on God’s mercy and pity on humankind. God is full of compassion, the psalms often remind us, and we are called upon, in turn, to be compassionate men and women. This is the keystone of living our lives as followers of Christ.

This collect also reminds us that with God’s grace we may obtain the promises God provides for us. What exactly does that mean? Firstly, God sent Jesus to our world to show us the ways of God and God’s kingdom. All of this is for the purpose of leading us to deepen our relationship with God not only now, on this earth, but also to lead us into an eternal relationship with God. We call that *salvation*. Salvation is health: spiritual health.

Having a compassionate heart is a surefire way of finding a deep spiritual relationship with God! And with everyone else we meet on our earthly pilgrimage. Developing a compassionate heart is a life-long endeavor and opportunity which results in rewards of health to our body, our minds and our souls.

Pope Francis knows this at a profound level. And hasn’t he given the United States of America and the United Nations the most poignant and heart-felt reminders of the need for all of us to be not only compassionate persons, but compassionate leaders in governance and in business and industry? In addressing the pressing issues of our day, he spoke with a tone of sincerity and deep comprehension of the moral issues all of us must address. He did not lecture, he inspired.

In order to do this, Francis had to have developed his compassionate heart over decades of years living in and among people of all socio-economic backgrounds, particularly with the less fortunate.

Clearly his focus is upon how we, the most blessed nation in the world, respond to the challenges of poverty, the environment, and caring for and promoting the dignity of every human person. These issues are far from new. These are the moral issues of our day. But they are ours—not just someone else’s. It is up to us to own the issues and prayerfully respond individually and as a Christian body to our neighbors and to the world that God has given us to steward.

Church

We have heard Bill Purves speak to the heart of what it means to be stewards of our lives, and of all things dear to us. Grateful hearts—making all things new. Bill, thank you for your spiritual leadership as we begin our stewardship campaign this year.

I hold the conviction that the *ecclesia*—the church—is an essential entity in our lives. It’s not extra or peripheral to my spiritual life, and I trust it is not to yours either. It’s why it is so important to support the life of the church in different dimensions. Financial support is critical, but so is engagement with the ministries we develop to reach out into the world and to engage with the ministries which nourish the members of our church.

I think the healthiest persons I know have their feet firmly on spiritual ground, despite the ups and downs with every type and form of church life, who faithfully support their religious communities and experience a variety of ways to live out their mission to serve the world. People who learn that church is not boring—in fact it’s rather exciting—when one realizes how much one can be part of and enrich one’s life through prayer, learning and service.

I believe that coming together for strength is vital. Coming together for quiet reflection, prayer, and shared community and communion is a spiritual strengthening agent for each of us to continue living in our world: as children or young people or older adults. How blessed I know I am to have had parents who introduced me to worshipping God and saying prayers. I no longer take this for

granted, particularly as I witness the huge numbers of families who have discounted the value of being part of a church or other place of worship.

Gratitude

In the lesson we read today from the Book of James, one portion stood out for me, and I quote: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should all for the elders of the church and have them pray for them...”

The entire context of these admonitions is *within the body*...within the church. Whether one is suffering or sick or cheerful...no matter...there is something to be done with others who are brothers or sisters within the church.

How healthy is that? Very. Being alone and isolated, particularly when one is suffering or sick, does not lend itself to a good outcome. Having persons pray for and be in solidarity with the sick and suffering leads to maximum levels of wellness. Of course this can occur outside of the *ecclesia*—the church—but it certainly is a wellspring of “being church” together.

I am grateful for this aspect of “being church” which we probably do not address sufficiently. We just do it. It is natural to most of us, but it is not inconsequential. We are all called to pay attention to the other and be companions in our spiritual journeys. *Grateful hearts reach out to grateful hearts* when we visit the sick or lift up the spirits of someone suffering from heartache or distress. Grateful hearts rejoice when someone is happy and content and living life to the fullest! And as the writer of James said, “Are any [of you] cheerful?” Well, if so, sing a song of cheerfulness! Share the joy! Let others rejoice with you. Share the gratitude.

Pope Francis lifted up the virtue of gratitude early in his visit this past week. I took note because I too believe that gratitude is a most essential part of living a Christ-like life. I had the opportunity to listen to his sermon at the time he gave it at St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York.

Perhaps you did too. He was primarily addressing the clergy at the evening service; however, all of us got to “listen in” to what he said to them. He offered two brief reflections, in his gentle manner. And I quote: “The first concern is of the spirit of gratitude. The joy of men and women who love God attracts others to him...Joy springs from a grateful heart.”

Later in the homily he challenges with the question, “Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: are we capable of counting our blessings? Or have I forgotten them?” I think that is a question we all might well ponder today as we begin our examination of how we will contribute to the life of St. James in time, talent and treasure this coming year. I was truly struck with the question—with the challenge—with the “I” statement Pope Francis made: “Are we capable of counting our blessings? Or have I forgotten them?”

For sure, there are times when I forget my blessings—when I get caught up in the demands of the day or night, when I get don’t get enough rest, when I fail to put God’s goodness and light front and center day-by-day, when I fail to prioritize and let contemporary style stress creep into my being. Perhaps you too do some of these things? If so, let’s together focus on our genuine blessings and be a source of light and life to the world “out there,” but ever as much to one another “in here.” At church. In the assembly. In our *ecclesia*.

With a full heart today, I urge you to renew the cradle of receptivity of the Spirit within yourselves, lift up your hearts in prayer and praise and rejoice in the goodness of God in our midst.

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