

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

LOVE, MERCY, LIFE

Opening the Heart of Marriage

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 24-30, 2016

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SUNDAY HOMILY NOTES

Note to homilists: The text that follows is to provide you with content as you consider how you would like to integrate Church teaching on marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning into your homily. This text is not meant to be proclaimed in its entirety, although you may choose to do so.

Sunday July 24, 2016

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: Genesis 18: 20-32

Responsorial Psalm: 138: 1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8

R. Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

Second Reading: Colossians 2:12-14

Gospel: Luke 11:1-13 (111)

In today's day and age, longevity is generally considered a blessing. When referring to our future as senior citizens, we often repeat phrases such as, "the golden years." Although this can give us a sense of comfort, unfortunately, like many things in life, "old age" can actually become a mixture of blessings and crosses.

When aging gracefully, a person can experience some of the happiest years of life: freedom from the stress of work and unforgiving schedules; lots of time to spend with family and friends; and slowing down to "smell the roses." For others, however, the golden years can be a time of: non-stop cycles of sickness, slow recovery, relapse; the uncomfortable feeling of uselessness; and being a burden to our loved ones. Take, for example dementia. As the average life expectancy increases, more people we know or love live with dementia. This can be very difficult for both patient and loved ones. Thankfully, there may be days that include little hints of mental struggle. Other days sadly may not be as good since they may be filled with irrational words and behavior. For those of us who spend time with people who are so afflicted, we may

have to cut short a visit on a bad day, only to return another day when the time may be better for the patient. I say all this to point out how “timing is everything.”

Have you ever experienced what people often call a “perfect storm?” It’s when all of the circumstances conspire to make things come together in the worst way imaginable. Something like this happened in 1968 to Blessed Pope Paul VI when he issued the papal encyclical (letter) *Humanae vitae*. If you have heard of the encyclical, chances are what you’ve heard is not good. That could not be farther from the truth!

Humanae vitae is the modern papal encyclical that reaffirms Church teaching on married love, responsible parenthood, the good of children, and the moral prohibition of contraception. To put it mildly, that document landed like a lead balloon and was never really given a chance to be properly understood by the faithful (and some clergy too!).¹ Church teaching, however articulates God’s truth. And, the truth will prevail! It would not be until Pope St. John Paul II presented Church teaching in what is now called the “Theology of the Body,” that the faithful would be open to learning about the meaning of human sexuality, the nature of marriage, and the ethical regulation of fertility in marriage. Pope St. John Paul II correctly read the times and knew that what the Catholic Church teaches about human sexuality is good news for all people! This week we celebrate Natural Family Planning Awareness and providentially today’s readings show us a God whose timing is impeccable and whose pedagogy is remarkably patient and effective. Understanding a bit more about God’s providence and patience will help us to more deeply embrace what he teaches about marriage and the family.

God’s patience is certainly put to the test by Abraham in the today’s first reading. Any of us who have been pestered by another’s incessant questioning knows that we quickly reach a limit. Abraham even goes so far as to imply that God would be unjust if he were to “sweep away the innocent with the guilty.” We’ll come back to God’s patience in just a moment. First, let’s consider a couple dimensions of this story. At first glance we might conclude that God is very permissive—as long as we have good people around we can do whatever we want. But the truth is that neither Abraham nor God ever gloss over the fact that some are innocent and others are guilty. If anything, the dialogue is reminiscent of a line from Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*:

¹ Apropos of the idea that timing is crucial to how something is received, preaching on the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah might not be prudent at this time. Given the level of irrational discourse surrounding so-called “same-sex marriage” one must conclude that fruitful discourse is not likely for the time being. In imitation of Jesus, who generally refrained from provoking people, we do our duty to “hold the line,” which is to say we state clearly, patiently, and charitably that marriage is between a man, a woman, and God. Beyond that, we pray and wait for the day when we can once again be more assertive in sharing the good news of conjugal love and marriage with people who are both able and willing to listen.

This is a deep mystery, and an inexhaustible subject of meditation, that the salvation of many depends on the prayers and voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer for this intention and on the cooperation of pastors of souls and of the faithful, especially of fathers and mothers of families, a cooperation which they must offer to our Divine Savior as though they were His associates (*Mystici Corporis Christi*, no. 44).

In other words, the salvation of many depends upon the goodness of a few! God's providence is such that goodness, even when vastly outnumbered by evil, is greater and will always win out in the end. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah God neither condones their sinful actions nor does He give up on the good that is still in their midst. In fact, God believes that good people, though they are so few, will be enough to spare the punishment deserved by the many people who are evil. On some level we might believe that too, except that our experiences so often belie this. Examples from the 20th century alone challenge the thesis that good always prevails over evil; depravities such as the Holocaust, eugenics, and rampant terrorism call into question how God can permit such horrors and still expect us to trust Him, to believe in Him. When Pope Benedict XVI was elected he meditated on this point:

We suffer on account of God's patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man (Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, April 24, 2005).

God shows His forbearance to Abraham by sparing the people. All these centuries later we know now that this prefigures how God would definitively save His people from a punishment that was all but inevitable. What we really wanted was "A God without wrath (who) brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross..." (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, NY: Harper & Row, 1959, p. 193). As St. Paul points out in the second reading, what we got instead was a God who was willing to die so as to nail our sins to the cross.

Some time ago I came across a nugget that convincingly explains how Jesus was the one whose perfect goodness obliterated the guilt of us all:

"It is finished," (Jn. 19:30). Those three English words are, in the original Greek of the Gospels, just one word: *tetélestai*. Scholars got more insight into the meaning of the expression a few years ago after some archaeologists dug up in the Holy Land a tax collector's office that was almost intact, with all the tax records and everything. There were two stacks of tax records and one of them has the word 'tetélestai' on the top. In other words, 'paid in full.' These people don't owe anything anymore. So when Jesus said, "it is finished," what is finished? It

is the debt we owe God by our sins. It has been paid in full (Rev. Munachi Ezegu, CSSP, **Homily for Good Friday** at: <https://justmehomely.wordpress.com/2012/03/31/good-friday-of-the-lords-passion-year-b-2>).

As in the story of Abraham and the rampant sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, God does not turn a blind eye to evil. Rather, he continually shows us the path to true love, mercy, and life. In the Gospel Jesus goes to great length to prove His Father's goodness—how he would never give us a snake when we ask for a fish. Of all the things Jesus taught, perhaps one of the most recurrent is that His Father is perfectly trustworthy. And while it is relatively easy to say “In God we trust,” it's generally very difficult for us to live this claim. God knows this better than we do, so he waits until the time is right. When teaching about the Eucharist, Jesus knows many will leave Him—he gives his Apostles permission to do the same. He does this to make it perfectly clear that he wants us to come to him freely. Over the centuries, the Church, as Christ's bride, has striven to do the same. As Pope St. John Paul II once put it, “the Church proposes; she imposes nothing.” (Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 1990, no. 39). And so we come full circle to the patience of God, and we see how he waits until we're ready to receive. Years ago Pope Paul VI proclaimed the beauty of conjugal love by speaking of its innate freedom, fidelity, and openness to life. What was rejected then is more palatable these days as many of our young people study and live the Theology of the Body. And, while the Gospel extols the value of human persistence, when it comes to imparting the truth no one comes close to God with regard to determination.

From 1979 until 1984 St. John Paul II spent the majority of his Wednesday audiences explaining God's plan for love and marriage. Fundamentally the Pope taught that no person should ever be used or manipulated—sadly, this happens much more frequently when the human heart is opened to a contraceptive mentality. The Holy Father cited the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et spes* by reminding us that we can only discover who we really are through a sincere gift of ourselves (see GS, no. 24). As made clear in *Humanae vitae*, such a sincere gift must be freely given, it must be a total gift of self that proves itself by fidelity and a fruitfulness so tangible that we even have to give it a name (see HV, nos. 9, 10). These days countless couples are striving to live God's plan for marriage and the results are obvious: more noise in church and even more chaos once Mass is done, but a lot more happiness and a brighter future too!

Now that Pope Francis has rightly intuited that many are understandably concerned with nature and the many manipulations thereof, it's no wonder that our young people find Natural Family Planning to be attractive: no chemicals, no unhealthy manipulation of the body, no permanent negative side effects. Because Blessed Pope Paul VI prophetically predicted many of the results of the contraceptive movement, many today are more suspicious of claims that we can wantonly make our body serve our boundless desire for pleasure. And while old habits die hard (and some have compared contraception to other sundry addictions), the truth of God's plan for conjugal love is proving to be more resilient and attractive than was thought two generations ago.

In conclusion, if the salvation of many still depends on the holiness of a few, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the hearts of many in the Church and inviting us to open our hearts to God. While there are many benefits of Natural Family Planning, possibly its greatest attribute is that it demands sacrifice and communication. So does true love. The time is right not only to hear this good news, but also by the grace God gives us in the Sacraments, to live it more fully and courageously. The late Father John Harvey put this well when he wrote:

Everyone needs love—and tragically, many may find little or no true love in this life. This is because there are many counterfeits of love. Some are simply insincere, like manipulations or narcissistic projection, which is self-love looking like love for someone else. Other counterfeits are more sincere and honest enough, but they are not true love. They may be sympathy or indulgence or even affection built on mutual concern and attraction, but they fall short of being true love. For as St. Paul reminds us, love never fails (1 Cor. 13:13). Love seeks not its own but rather bears all things, endures all things, hopes all things (*The Homosexual Person*, Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 11).

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