

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Feb. 6-7, 2021, Cycle B

Are you an optimist or a pessimist? This February, we may be feeling bleaker and more pessimistic than normal during midwinter. It has now been a year since we saw our first death from COVID-19. Waiting for the impact of immunizations to take full effect, the world now alternates between full lockdown and the relative freedom that comes with wearing masks and social distancing. For the first time in the memory of the living, the whole world shares a motive for echoing Job's despair we hear from the Book of Job. Job even bemoans the fact of his human existence! Job cries out: "Is not man's life on earth a drudgery? Are not his days those of hirelings? He is a slave who longs for the shade.... I have been assigned months of misery, and troubled nights have been allotted me. I shall not see happiness again."

Job can hardly be blamed for his pessimism or despair. Job saw his contentment and wellbeing as being intrinsically bound to his success as a patriarch of a large family, to his health and material health, and to his good name. Job felt he was blessed by God, and that God was pleased with him, for Job had it all; family, health, wealth and a good name. Job's glass was not just half-full; it was full to the brim. But then almost overnight, the bottom fell out of Job's world; he lost it all; his family was killed in a monumental accident, his wealth evaporated, and Job was struck with sickness and disease. Job's optimism, hope, and joy faded, and with no help from his so called friends who exacerbated Job's situation by trying to find someone to blame for Job's troubles: "God must be punishing you for you have sinned greatly," while Job knew that it was not true that he had sinned against God.

In our gospel story, we meet Peter's mother-in-law, who like Job, was sick and suffering. However, unlike Job, Peter's mother-in-law had a family, friends, and Jesus who do not despair for her, nor try to blame her for her illness, or see the situation as hopeless. With Jesus in the lead, the family and friends of Peter's mother-in-law helped her to confront the misfortune of her illness, and see what good could be brought forth. We are told Jesus "grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her." She became strong enough to be able to wait on her guests.

Our scriptures invite us to consider our own responses to inevitable difficulties and evils of life we must face; evils such as the Coronavirus and COVID-19. How do we help others to cope with their struggles? Are we pessimists complaining about the evil in the world, trying to seek scapegoats, instead of being optimists and seeking to find real solutions? Are we what William J. Bausch has called "hope-givers?" By way of illustration Bausch relates a story once told to him:

"As he sat on a newly covered antique window seat that his wife, Helen, had treasured through many years, the man was burdened with a sense of hopelessness. Problems at work weighed heavily on him, and because of his advanced years, the man feared he would not be able to find another job. He started to light his pipe and accidentally spilled some hot ash, which burned a hole right in the center of the window seat cover. How would Helen react to a hole in her treasured antique? As Bausch tells it, Helen calmly threaded a needle and stitched a beautiful flower over the charred spot.

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“When her husband looked at the finished work, he realized that in that moment, he could see a summary of their long life together. His heart began to soar. He had married a repairer of broken spirits, a healer of wounds, and a woman whose very presence was an antidote to despair. He understood, perhaps for the very first time, that it was Helen’s deep abiding trust in God that made it possible for her to be a source of light and a giver of hope in times that might plunge others into darkness and despair” (from *A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers*, Twenty-Third Publications, 1998).

Like Helen’s husband, we all burn holes in precious things. We make holes in our relationships through selfishness and thoughtlessness. We burn holes in the hearts of one another with angry words, gossip, and lies. Whether we dash another’s enthusiasm or ridicule their dreams or quash their hope, we burn holes. Holes grow deeper and wider when we do not forgive or ask for forgiveness. We humans have burned a hole into the precious gift of human life with the Coronavirus, COVID-19, and the way we have reacted to the pandemic.

Since, we are broken, wounded, sinful human beings, holes are inevitable. However, we are free to choose the attitude with which we will deal with holes. Will we despair and become lost in negativity and bemoan the misery we are suffering? Or, we will be like Peter’s mother-in-law’s family, friends and Jesus – and see what good can be brought forth? And like Helen, seek to heal the hole, whose trust in God made of her a giver of hope to others?