

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time B “Spiritual Paralysis”
Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, have you ever felt times in your life when you feel just paralyzed in spirit? Have you ever felt like there was a crowd of worries and anxieties that block you from being able to sit down at the feet of our Lord? Three years ago, my Grandfather was hospitalized due to the end stages of emphysema. When I rushed over to Spokane to give him the sacrament of anointing, my grandpa shared with me that he pressed his medical alert button the night before. He simply couldn't breathe. He didn't think he would even make it to the hospital. He told me that he thought he was going to die right then. His exact words to me were, “I was trying to kick the bucket, sonny, but I missed the bucket!” He told me that, while he was lying on the floor, he asked my Grandmother, his wife of over 60 years, to get him his mother's rosary. What a scene that must have been. He told me that if he was going to die right then, he wanted to die praying with his mother's rosary with grandma holding his hand. I think you can agree with me that it goes without saying that when you are lying on the floor thinking you are going to die, this can be a very paralyzing experience for the soul. It was during this time of spiritual and physical paralysis, that my Grandfather needed to be carried by praying “Hail Mary's” with his mother's rosary while holding Grandma's hand.

And so, Grandpa made it to the hospital and the wonderful doctors and nurses were able to stabilize him. In my experience, however, even when you are receiving good care, it is difficult to pray when you are hospitalized. Hospitalization is a paralyzing experience. With the suffering of pain that comes from being in infirmity, with doctors and nurses coming in and out every few minutes, well meaning family and friends scurrying about, and the uncertainty and anxiety that comes from waiting on the doctor's next diagnosis or prognosis, these things are like that crowd in the Gospel reading that can block us from sitting at the feet of the Lord. It was hard for my family and I to remain spiritually focused as well during this time. It was a comfort, however, for my Grandfather and my family to be carried by the prayer of the Church with the rite of anointing and Holy Communion. Again, the rosary was of great help to all of us during that time.

A week or so later, the Lord called my Grandfather home. He died peacefully in his sleep. And although our family was happy that he was finally at peace in heaven with no more pain or suffering, the death of a loved one is a very exhausting and even paralyzing experience for family and friends. Again, there is a herd of details and lists of things that have to get done that crowd our minds, calling relatives, calling the local parish priest, calling the funeral home, etc., all making it difficult to focus our hearts in prayer. It is during difficult times such as the death of a loved one, when we aren't very capable of coming up with spontaneous prayer, that we are grateful to be carried by the prayer and rituals of the Church.

When we pray, the heart communicates in ways that words can sometimes cheapen. Therefore, the rosary can be very helpful at times like that, when there are no words that can adequately communicate to God what is going on in our hearts. God knows better than we can articulate. The mantra of the Hail Mary's is therefore helpful. They can also help disperse the crowds of thoughts and worries in the mind that block us from being carried to the feet of our Lord.

My friends, have you ever felt times in your life when you feel just paralyzed in spirit? Have you ever felt like there was a crowd of worries and anxieties that block you from being able to sit down at the feet of our Lord? There are so many things in life that, although are good things, can cause a crowd to form in our soul; the business of all that has to get done at work, all the homework and school obligations, and special projects that have to get completed, the piles of dishes and laundry at home, the anxieties that come from reading or watching the news, or our portfolio, the list goes on. There are many things in life that can be paralyzing, such as sickness, the death of someone we love, mental illness, depression, alcohol or drug addiction, the loss of a friendship, a broken marriage, trouble at work, trouble at school, turmoil in the family, the list goes on. When we are paralyzed, we need to be carried by the prayers, care and concern of those we love. We need to be carried by each other and the communion of saints when we can't carry ourselves.

Indeed this Gospel reading is very comforting for those who feel spiritually paralyzed right now. On the other hand, for those whose lives are more or less peaceful right now, the Gospel doesn't let us off the hook. The Gospel provides a very special challenge to those whose lives are going along more or less peacefully. The Gospel presents to us a paralyzed man who desired to be carried to the feet of the Lord. The Gospel would have ended in tragedy if there were no one there to pick him up and carry him to Jesus. Since we know that there are going to be times when we will need to be carried by the prayers, care and concern of others, we are challenged by the Gospel to do our part during the good times to do some carrying of those whose lives aren't going so well right now. The irony of the story is, just as the four men brought the paralytic to Jesus. In a real way, the paralytic also brought the four men to Jesus. When we carry others to Christ, in truth we are also carried to Christ.

Take a moment and think about the people you know who are struggling right now, in your family or extended family, in your circle of friends, at work or at school, when we look at the needs in our local and global community, there are people right now who need our help, who need our prayers, who need to be carried to Jesus. If we don't, who will? If we don't who will? Here is one example:

I believe the third commandment of honoring the Sabbath is so critically important in the life of the Church. I think we can get ourselves into a bad rut at times thinking that the only reason why I should go to church on Sunday is if I “get something” out of it. Perhaps at times we might wake up on Sunday morning and think to ourselves, “ah the sun is out and the weather is nice, I really don’t feel a need to go to Mass today”. First of all, if the priests all did this, what would happen to all of you? The bishop might also become a little grumpy I would suspect.

But beyond that, I think we sometimes adopt the rationale in our heads at times that the only reason why I should go to Mass is when I personally “get something” out of it, whether this be the music, the homily, the beautiful park like setting around the church, etc. the idea is, I should only feel obligated to go to Church when I personally feel the need to go. Here on the East Side of Seattle, when I am working with young families, it sometimes seems like, the third commandment is optional, pending soccer schedule.

Here is why I believe missing Sunday mass is not only a sin but a serious one. It has to do with today’s Gospel reading. I believe it is precisely when we do not feel the need to go to Church on Sunday when we must go, we must go. The reason is this: although I may not feel the need to sit in a pew today and listen to another esoteric homily that doesn’t “feed me”, my presence alone is what is necessary for the many paralyzed souls who are also in the church with me that Sunday Morning. My presence is necessary, whether I want to be here or not, because I need to be here to help carry those who are spiritually paralyzed right now, by simply being here and fully participating in the liturgy through my prayer and singing.

You have to understand that as the priest, I look out at the congregation every Sunday and I see what you don’t see because I see the people I have been ministering to: parishioners who lost their husband or wife recently to death or abandonment, parishioners who have just been diagnosed with cancer or another horrible disease, parishioners who are anxiously waiting test results or a surgery in the near future, parishioners who just lost their job and are wondering what the future holds for them, the list goes on. These parishioners are here on Sunday and they need the rest of us here to be present for them, helping to carry them to the Lord.

If we are not here on Sunday, because we don’t “feel like it” today, that is really selfish in my point of view. It is like seeing the paralytic on the ground in our Gospel reading, and just walking by him indifferently. On the other hand, if we are sick with the flu or we are travelling in the air that day and we can’t convince the pilot to land for mass someplace, this is understandable of course. I don’t think that is really sinful provided we make time for prayer to God. We also have to keep in mind the souls who are not present because they are so paralyzed in spirit that they can’t physically or psychologically get out the door for mass. This is when we have to help them to Mass or carry Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to them after Mass. We have Eucharistic Ministers who do this, bring the Eucharist to those would couldn’t otherwise come to Mass.

But even if we are on vacation away from the parish, we still need to make it Sunday Mass if at all possible. This is good for our souls of course, and very good for our relationship with God whom we owe our lives to, but our presence is also good for the souls who are spiritually paralyzed in the church that day. And when we gather in prayer, however, it is also good to remember the spiritually paralyzed who are not there, those who are living and those who have passed on. This is why I think it is a good practice to pray for the souls in purgatory, souls who have recently passed away and are in need of our prayers that help carry them through their experience of purification before entering their heavenly home.

You see, during the course of my grandpa's illness and death, none of the people in our family could carry the load of this grief by themselves. We needed each other to lean on. We helped carry each other in our paralysis you might say. In this, we grew in our love for grandpa, in our love for each other, and in our love of God and the precious gift of life. The way I look at it is this, if we are made in this life to grow in our love for God and for one another, in the experience of carrying each other during times of suffering, we most definitely can grow in love of God and for each other. In fact, during this time of our family's history, I think it was ironically my grandfather who carried the rest of us the most, by his amazing and steadfast faith. You see, Grandpa saw death for what it was. Death is not a grave. Death is a window to what life is really about, everlasting life, our eternal vocation and our eternal home. Grandpa taught us how much we need each other and that personal strength alone doesn't get us into paradise. We have to be carried.