

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 14, 2010
Fr. Joe Bambenek
REFRESH Retreat Closing Mass

Malachi 3:19-20 Psalm 98 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 Matthew 11:25-30*
* Gospel reading substituted per *GIRM* 358

“But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays.”

Let me begin this homily by admitting that it is challenging to find the right words to express what it feels like to be with you here today. Just to give a little background, in 1998 I came on this retreat for the first time, and I remained involved with it until I hit the team retirement age of 35, seven years later. REFRESH was a very important part of my vocation story, of how I went from Jet-setting Joe flying around the country for Consumers Energy to Fr. Joe. Today I am a priest of about 6 months, thanks in no small part to the retreat... Sitting among you are a handful of people with whom I have come to belong deeply over the past dozen years, some of whom were even personal witnesses to my ordination. A tradition of becoming a priest is that during one's first year, a newly ordained can say Masses of Thanksgiving at churches, etc. that have been important to the new priest. I am counting this Mass as one of my Masses of Thanksgiving, because I have so much to be thankful for when it comes to this retreat. In fact, over the years, other than for my very first Mass, I have looked forward to this Mass of Thanksgiving as much as any. Hence, I am here on vacation this weekend to celebrate with you. I am on vacation from my parish assignment in St. Paul Minnesota for I grew up in Minnesota, lived in Michigan for 9 years for work. Enough about me for now... let us focus instead on the theme in today's scripture readings that really jumped out as being particularly relevant to what I hope you have experienced this weekend on REFRESH.

Several weeks ago, when I started reflecting upon the Bible readings that were just proclaimed, the line in the first reading about the sun of justice and healing really struck me... In fact, I immediately thought of the REFRESH logo... a logo with the sun in it... and I thought of how my experience in REFRESH over the years was a catalyst of healing for myself. In addition, I thought about how I watched REFRESH be a time of healing for so many of the people with whom I was involved over the years. I thought of how the friendships I made through the retreat have been some of the best in my life... and of how I hope and pray that this weekend was for each and every one of you, a time of healing.

Last night we had the opportunity to celebrate what is an often difficult yet beautiful sacrament: the sacrament of penance. The sacrament is a special time when the rays of God's justice and God's love can shine into our hearts like at no other time. Confession can be an intimidating experience, because in the sacrament we are in fact judged guilty for our sins, the sins which we, in humility, have brought forward to the Lord. But then, instead of being punished as we deserve for them, God sets aside His justice. Instead, our sins are covered by Jesus' atoning death, and instead, God pours upon us His healing love, His healing mercy into our lives, into our hearts. In God's eyes, when we ask for forgiveness, when the priest prays the words of Absolution, we are restored; our relationship with God is made anew, and God gives us the gift of His grace that allows us to do better in the future, provided that we accept that gift and the strength that accompanies it.

But freedom and healing from sin is just one dimension to the healing God wants to give us. Jesus desires restoration in our relationships on Earth. That is one of the reasons why Catholics believe that the sacrament is an important part of seeking forgiveness from God, why there is something missing, or several things missing when we just try and tell God that we are sorry on our own. The priest in confession sits not only in the place of God, but also in the place of the Church... in the place of the Body of Christ, recognizing that our sins not only impact ourselves, but in some way have an impact on other lives as well; and thus the healing is not just healing with God, but healing among one another. The healing of relationships. The restoration of belonging.

And today's readings also have something to say about how it is that we should go about healing on the human level. In the gospel we heard the line "come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will REFRESH you..." In fact, think back to Friday night for a moment. You can raise your hands if you want. How many of you came to the retreat feeling labored after a long week? How many felt burdened by the various things in life that were weighting upon your heart? How many of you were wondering why on Earth you were going to a retreat place in the middle of nowhere and were even tempted to turn around as you were driving here? And why were we decorating lunch bags anyway? If the priest would have asked us those questions to us 12 years ago, I would have answered yes to all 4 questions. I call today's gospel verse the REFRESH verse. In fact I used a provision in liturgical law to substitute its reading today for the gospel that is usually heard this Sunday, because it is so relevant. Thanks to my involvement in REFRESH, today's verse is one of my favorite in the Bible. And it is a reading I get to proclaim and preach on often, as today's gospel is one of the options in the liturgy for the Anointing of the Sick. Because of my fondness for it, I normally choose it when I celebrate that sacrament of healing. The passage reminds us that it is God to whom we should turn in our weakness, in our struggles, in our hurts. He is the source of true healing.

It can be tempting when we feel lonely, when we feel unloved, when we feel rejected to turn to other things for comfort, thinking that they will bring us healing. I would suspect that most of us, if not all of us, know what it is that we tend to turn to: a typical list for people in their 20s and 30s include: TV, video games, music, the Internet, alcohol & other drugs, sex, shallow friendships, pets, sports, food. I'm sure that I am missing some. Not all of what I just mentioned are bad or always sinful. In fact most of them are good things, even awesome things, when done in the right context and the right amount. But they are not supposed to replace God. In fact, a general principle about good and evil is that the Devil cannot create anything bad on his own; all he can do is figure out ways to tempt us with ways to twist what is good in a bad direction.

And how often when we turn to them to drown our sorrows or our pain do we ultimately find ourselves worse off than before? Another spiritual principle is that sin never heals. In fact, sin does the opposite. Even if sin takes the edge off of pain in the short term, it leads to deeper wounds; and it has consequences which can, with time, make life even more difficult and painful. Sin has consequences that harm us; sin has consequences that harm others. In contrast, God's justice, God's love, God's mercy are the only paths to true healing and true peace; they are paths with good consequences.

So instead of turning to other things, and especially instead of turning to sinful things in our times of pain, God invites us to turn to Him. And despite how many times we may have turned in the wrong direction in our past, God's invitation to turn to Him never expires – at least in this life. Each and every day, in each and every circumstance, God invites us to turn to Him for refreshment. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, His arms are always wide

open for us; He is always waiting for us. God invites us to turn to His truth and His love. To turn to His truth about how to persevere in difficult circumstances. To turn to Jesus' remarkable and revolutionary example of forgiveness when we have been hurt. And He also invites us to turn to His truth about you.

His truth about me?, you might ask. Yes, God's truth about how much He loves you. About how God created each and every one of us in this room in love; about how each one of us is special in His eyes. As you have hopefully come to learn this weekend more deeply, while you are not alone, no two of us are completely alike. He made each one of us wondrously different for He made each one of us for a special purpose. He made us each in His image for a purpose which no one else can fulfill. We cannot be replaced in God's plan. Hence, He wants us to cooperate with His plan; God needs us to cooperate with His plan.

Near the end of the retreat you heard talks about making a difference and about vocation. Those talks should remind us of the value in taking the effort to discover God's truths about who He made each and every one of us to be. He made us with different gifts, with different vocations. Nevertheless, He made each one of us in His image. He made each one of us for a purpose that cannot be duplicated by anyone else.

One way to heal and ultimately defeat whatever loneliness, emptiness or sadness or pain is in our lives is to become more fully the person who God made each of us uniquely to become. It is when we give ourselves in love to others, acting in God's image and acting according to His unique plan for our lives, that we come to live in true freedom and joy. It is when we are no longer try to be what others want us to be... when we no longer try to be who we want to be... that we can finally be who God made us to be, and experience the joy and peace that goes with it. For then it is like we are a machine that finally is doing what it was built to do. Like a golf cart that finally gets to be on a golf course rather than trying to be a payload at a construction site.

One of my weaknesses as a Team member, and now as a priest, is that my talks and homilies tend to go a bit long... so if this were a REFRESH talk, it is where I would play the first song ... although don't worry, I am well over halfway done...

I come here today with a special recognition of the process and ultimate joy about which I just spoke. For it was through my involvement with REFRESH that I came to understand God's plan for my life, and ultimately, to accept His call to the priesthood. Twelve years ago this weekend I was sitting where you are... in this very building, in fact... Despite having lived a richly blessed life, I was unhappy, I was hurt. In particular I was hurt from rejection by the women I most wanted to love me; and I was lonely. And it was twelve years ago this weekend when the trajectory of my life changed toward the direction of the priesthood. At first it was not a huge change. For the math or science types here, I would describe that retreat weekend as an inflection point in my life, rather than the start of a radical new trajectory. Getting to the point where I am now, standing before you as a joyful priest, of being the man that God made me to be, required healing. It required asking forgiveness from hurts I had done to others... including sending the letter that we had to write, written to someone asking for forgiveness. Once I left the weekend, it required taking the time to listen to God... in prayer... through others... through thinking about how God had made me, of my strengths and my weaknesses, my natural desires and non-desires for lack of a better term. And it required trusting in God. It required trust that listening to His voice would really bring me healing, rather than a life of loneliness, as a priest. One of my objections was: How could I heal from the wounds of rejection by women by living as a celibate priest I wondered? It required trust.

Coming to where I am also required the encouragement and insights of others. In particular, near the end of the retreat weekend, I think it was on Sunday afternoon, after having a

very enjoyable lunchtime conversation with a woman named Heather, I pulled a couple notes out of my mailbag and found one from Heather. I must give a little background, that weekend there were 15 women and only 6 guys on the retreat: what a great ratio that was! And among the 15, I thought there were some pretty amazing women. Nevertheless, of the 15, Heather was #2 in terms of who I thought I would most want to date. So what did the note say? It said something like: "I think you would make an excellent priest." To say the least, it was not what I wanted to hear from her of all people. And, in fact, I would never see Heather again. But her message started something in my heart. It was a moment in which the rays of God's love and His truth came into my heart in a new and brighter way.

The impact that Heather had on my life is a reminder that God has no hands but ours. God made us to be encouraged and to be encouragers... In fact, on my ordination prayer cards I put the verse "encourage each other daily, while it is still today." Lest I forget, I put some ordination prayer cards on the table in the lobby. They are free and feel free to take one as you head out today.

My decision to become a priest was in no way instantaneous. I did not leave this building 12 years ago ready to sign over my life to God as a priest. It would take much more time to grow in trust of God. It would take more encouraging words, for Heather was merely the first of about 30 more people who would suggest on their own volition the same to me, even though I was keeping my discernment a secret. My path to healing would require giving REFRESH talks that required me to think about my relationships and on who God made me really to be. And then ultimately, it was when I gave the REFRESH talk on vocation... vocation with a capital V as I put it... that I finally began to share with people the secret that I had by then been considering for years. What freedom came with finally taking off the "I am not supposed to be a priest" mask, or the iron-clad shield that I called it, and what joy.

Now, I am not expecting that each and every one of you will leave this weekend feeling called to a religious vocation, although this summer we did have two more former team members take a step in that direction. But I do hope that you will leave here with a deeper sense of how much God loves you. With a deeper desire to be open to God's voice in your life, and a deeper willingness to follow it when it becomes clearer... and with a sense of gratitude that Fr. Joe's extra long homily is now basically over.

Hopefully by coming closer to Jesus this weekend, you, too, feel refreshed as you now head back into the lives that you left on Friday evening. As you do so, I hope and pray that you will be open to the healing that God has offered you this weekend. I do hope that you will be open to God's voice in your life and in your heart. That you will turn to Him for true REFRESHment, and that as you do so, the sun of justice with its healing rays will burn brightly in your heart.

"But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays."