

Dear St. Mary Parishioners,

I am sending you this homily for the Third Sunday of Lent on Saturday evening, March 14th at 5:44 pm when I should be celebrating the 5:30 pm Mass. Instead we are all in our homes because of the decree by our Bishop to NOT gather in such huge numbers for weekend Mass. This is an unprecedented time in our country's existence. I hope we are all trying our best to "stay safe" and healthy as we wash our hands (often) and not panic. In the coming days and weeks I will be reaching out to you through our parish website and I hope you know I am always a phone call away. My cell number is (413) 441-0218. I am here with our incredible parish staff keeping things as normal as possible. WE WILL ALL GET THROUGH THIS.

This is the homily I would have given to you this Third Sunday of Lent. I love the story that the homily begins with.

In 1887 a seven year old girl named Helen was living in Alabama. This child was no ordinary little girl. She was blind, deaf and could not speak. Of course by now you know her name was Helen Keller. Helen lost her sight and hearing as the result of an illness when she was about one years old. Since she could no longer hear, she soon lost her ability to imitate sounds and thus speak. Helen was like an animal with no way to communicate with the outside world.

Yet before she died, Helen Keller would graduate from college with Honors, become a widely acclaimed author, be the White House guest of every President from Grover Cleveland to John F. Kennedy and become an inspiration to people with special needs the world over.

The story behind her amazing achievement dates back to a Spring day in 1887 when a 20 year old women from Agawam, Massachusetts named Annie Sullivan came to Alabama to be Helen's private teacher.

Annie Sullivan's first big step in establishing communication with little Helen came several weeks after her arrival. Helen described it in her autobiography THE STORY OF MY LIFE. She wrote:

"My teacher brought me my hat, and I knew we were going outside into the warm sunshine. We walked down the path to the well-house. Someone was drawing water from the well and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other hand the word WATER...I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly...like a bolt of lightening....the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that W-A-T-E-R meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy and set me FREE!!!!!! I left the well-house eager to learn Everything now had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that my teacher gave me. Helen Keller's experience at the well that Spring day truly changed her life forever.

The story of Helen Keller at the well bears a striking resemblance to the story in today's Gospel. It too took place at a well and it too involved a teacher and a young lady. It also used

water to communicate an important message that changed a young lady's life forever.

As in the case of Helen Keller, it lifted the Samaritan woman out of a world of darkness and opened to her a world of LIGHT. Like the life of Helen Keller, the Samaritan woman's life was changed forever.

It's important to note what the Samaritan woman did after her encounter with Jesus at the well. The Gospel says: "The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done." The Gospel adds that the people left the town and went to meet Jesus. And so the woman became Christianity's very first missionary. After her encounter with Jesus at the well she went off to share the good news about Jesus with her friends and neighbors. Herein lies the practical message in today's Gospel for each one of us.

We too should respond to our encounter with Jesus at the well of baptism the way the Samaritan did. We too should do what Helen Keller did. We should share with others the new life that our teacher made possible for us. We too should go off and share the good news of Christ with others.

Let me illustrate one way we can do this.

Of the roughly 51 million Catholic adults in the United States today, a great number of them are inactive Catholics. Statistics show that two-thirds of all Catholics who eventually return to the Church, do so because a friend or relative or a neighbor invited them. I believe an area of missionary work in which every Catholic in our parish could be involved is in welcoming inactive

people back to Church. Imagine the honor that would be...to be told by someone, "YOU welcomed me back....YOU were the face of Christ for me and I am forever grateful for you in my life."

Let me close with a prayer:

Lord, like Helen Keller, who discovered new life at a well of water, and like the Samaritan woman, who discovered new life at a similar well, help us share with others during these Lenten days the life that we too received at the well of baptism. Help us to be your modern day missionaries leading others back to you through our words and actions. Amen.