

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent
Deacon Bill Brawner, St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Belchertown, MA
March 4/5, 2017

Scripture Readings: [Genesis 2:7-9; 3: 1-7](#) ✻ [Psalm 51](#) ✻ [Romans 5:12-19](#) ✻ [Matthew 4:1-11](#)

“The Way To Love Is Love”

No idea stands alone. If anything explains the persistence of evil, this is it. *Ideas are organic: They link one to another, influence each other.* If peace lives in our hearts, everyone we meet experiences our lack of inner conflict. Each circumstance becomes an opportunity to reconcile dissension when it emerges. We still have choices to make daily: to embrace the guardians of heaven or to negotiate with demons. When we choose violence, prejudice, judgment, falsehood, idolatry, or infidelity, we’re breaking commandments... *denying ourselves* access to the blessings God freely bestows on us and wants us to have. Each time we cause harm to our neighbors or ourselves, we’re disregarding that primary commandment of Jesus to demonstrate our love for God by loving people. Every hour the solution is the same: Talk to God. Listen to the divine word.

In this gospel passage, the debate with the tempter begins - but something is different this time. Instead of being swayed by his sweet lies, Jesus clings to the word of God. The devil finds such company intolerable. When he departs, the landscape is flooded with angels, and desert becomes a paradise. Good news for us as **we** enter the Lenten desert ourselves! There are many ways to make sure our Lent is one with a happy ending. Let me share with you a recent experience I had, and see if you’ll agree that the way to love - is love

So, there was a cheetah licking my hand. In the middle of a 10,000 acre game preserve, full of elephant, giraffe, antelope, wart hogs, lions and monkeys. In Zambia. You all know me as a Roman Catholic Permanent Deacon assigned to a lovely, vibrant parish in western Massachusetts. So, why Zambia? This was the final day of a twelve-day adventure as a member of a delegation of priests and deacons from across the U.S. who’d traveled to learn more about the *life-enhancing programs* sponsored by our Church, through Catholic Relief Services.

Until today, you might be forgiven if you asked, “What is CRS?” Catholic Relief Services

operates in over 100 countries, offering Emergency Response & Recovery, Agriculture, Health, Education, Microfinance, Water & Sanitation, and Justice & Peace building programs. They are an organization created by the US Catholic Bishops back in 1943 as the official international agency of the American Church, originally to provide assistance in the aftermath of the massive destruction during and after WWII. One of the funding sources for their activities is Rice Bowls.

You may know about Rice Bowls; you may donate through our parish’s Lenten Rice Bowl project; you may not know where and how those funds are used, who they help. You need to know; you need to know what good works our Church is doing around the world; you need to know why your gifts, and interest, are so important to families in those 100+ countries.

CRS was invited into Zambia only in 1999, due to the devastating effects of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. The incidence of AIDS has been cut dramatically since CRS’s arrival. On my trip to Zambia, we also learned that more than 74 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Zambia is a peaceful country with vast agricultural lands. However, Zambia continues to suffer from the devastating impacts of an AIDS epidemic, chronic food insecurity and widespread poverty. Many rural families rely on survival-level farming, with limited access to credit or savings. During the “hungry season,” when food is scarce, many families eat only one meal a day.

I experienced three of CRS’s program, all of which are based on strengthening families. One that touched me especially was when we visited the Franciscan sisters at St. Anthony Parish in the northeastern region - known as the Copperbelt, under the direction of Sr. Grace. There we met Evelina. Like generations of Zambians before her, she told us she used to survive on meals made from corn flour, usually a porridge called “nshima.” “Growing up, I’d eat porridge in the

morning, at lunchtime and again in the evening,” she says. After all, it was cheap and easy to make. Unfortunately, nshima has very little nutritional value—and relying too heavily on it has led to high rates of malnutrition. Many in Zambia have full bellies, but little nourishment. And this is particularly dangerous for children under age 2, who need high levels of vitamins and minerals to grow up healthy and strong. Dozens of these children are cared for by Sr. Grace and her sisters.

One effect of the IDS/HIV epidemic is that older women who would usually be there to guide and assist new mothers with ‘family recipes’ and to pass along other successful childcare techniques, have died in the 100’s of thousands. That means mothers who are nursing—as well as their children—need nutritious meals, **but have no knowledge of how to make them.** Their young children are growing up with both physical and mental deficiencies. Like so much of the issues facing so many in the developing world, education can overcome, and reverse these deficiencies. So, CRS is training religious sisters to be master trainers so they in turn can, through hands-on sessions, teach women like Evelina how to prepare healthier meals, and to grow new, vitamin-rich crops like peanuts, pumpkins and sugar cane. In many cases, these crops were already being grown in the village. Now Evelina and others are adding more nutritious food to their children’s nshima, like ground peanuts or eggs. And, what the women learn, they share with their community – especially with expectant mothers. “We sing and dance during the cooking lessons because we are happy to learn how to cook different types of food,” says Evelina. Evelina is healthier, and so is her son, Steven. “I know I am taking good care of him, because he’s full of energy, he’s strong and never sick,” she says, with a smile.. As happened at each of our project stops, both children and adults broke into songs of thanks and praise. This is just one small, but powerful, example of our Church at work, making the world a better place.

But our RB donations don’t just do great work overseas.. CRS also helps those in need locally, right here in our diocese *and parish*. One quarter of RB donations stay here in our diocese. In past years, CRS has used these funds to make thousands of dollars in grants to our own T&E program... and they plan on making grants to our parish food pantry as well.

As I said at the start, ideas are organic. They don’t stand alone. If we want to be loving, we have to be on the way to love all the time. If we want mercy, we have to offer mercy ceaselessly. If we seek justice, all our relationships must deepen in justice. If we desire peace on earth, a little aggression here and there is no way to arrive at that goal. In the Gospel, Jesus rejects the tempter completely. He knows a little evil goes a long way. Our Church, through Catholic Relief Services, knows that a little **good** goes a long way too, in overcoming the conditions that stand in the way of millions of our brothers and sisters living full lives. That little good, that dollar-a-day of sacrificial giving into your RB during Lent will help more than you know.

That’s why I ended up being licked by a cheetah... 9,000 miles from home.