

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year B: Job 7:1-4, 6-7; Ps 147; 1Cor 9:16-19, 22-23; Mk 1:29-39
February 7, 2021
Fr. David Pignato

The Gospel for this Sunday gives us a good reminder of the priority of spiritual health over physical health – a topic that has come to the surface for many in the Church and in our society during this past year of pandemic. We have rightly been focused on taking all reasonable precautions to avoid the spread of the virus and to protect our physical health. But we have also been challenged to weigh and balance this focus on physical health with what is even *more* important, which is our spiritual health and our relationship with God.

The Gospel tells us that when Jesus entered the house of St. Peter, He healed Peter's mother-in-law who was sick with a fever. But then word of the healing must have spread, because “[w]hen it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. [And,] He cured many who were sick with various diseases” Jesus was clearly concerned and compassionate about the people's physical health. But the next day, when Jesus was praying, the disciples came to Him and said, “‘Everyone is looking for you.’ He told them, ‘Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.’” Jesus was making it clear that, even more important than physical healings was the spiritual healing that He had come to bring by His preaching about morality. Spiritual health – the health of the soul – was always a priority for Jesus, even above and beyond physical health (cf. Mk 2:5).

This has been an important truth for us to remember, especially during a time of pandemic, when we have felt an urgency about protecting our physical health. We all know that spiritual health is more important than physical health, because spiritual health has *eternal* consequences. It's the condition of our *souls*, not our bodies, that determines what happens to us when we die. What happens to our souls for eternity depends on our spiritual health at the moment of death, not our physical health. We know this because of what Jesus taught us. He said, “*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna*” (Mt 10:28).

In order to enter Heaven, a soul must be in a state of grace at the moment of death, which means free from any unforgiven grave sin. And to help make this happen, Christ gave us the sacraments of confession and anointing, so that we can

be restored to friendship with God, especially when we face risks to our physical health or near the end of our lives. Because of the eternal consequences of our spiritual health, it must always be a priority over our physical health, even though we also take all reasonable precautions to protect our bodies. The question the pandemic has raised for us is, “Do we protect our spiritual health as carefully as we protect our physical health? Do we take all possible precautions to protect our souls, the way we do to protect our bodies? Do we have the same urgency to avoid sin as we do to avoid virus and disease?”

A good way to think about this is to ask ourselves, if we had to choose, if we would rather be free from serious sin, or free from serious illness. Which would give us greater relief – knowing we are in good-standing with God, or knowing that we are physically healthy? We naturally desire to be healthy, but which is more important to us – our physical health, or our spiritual health?

The priority of spiritual health has come into focus for the Church in the effort to provide the sacraments in spite of the restrictions caused by the virus. Sin did not stop when the virus hit – souls have remained in need of God’s mercy in confession. And when the danger of death increased, souls were even *more* in need of the spiritual assistance and strength that is given by the Anointing of the Sick. Anointing is the last sacrament – the “last rite” and dispensation of grace that God gives to assist a soul, especially when the soul is near death and close to coming before the Lord to give an account of his or her life on earth. This sacrament must be available to those in need, even if there is a risk to physical health – because the state of the soul at death has eternal consequences.

Fr. Booth and I have been impressed by how often we are called to anoint, whether at home or at the hospital, and we are always willing and happy to go. The spiritual health and salvation of souls is more important than our own physical health – this is what the Church has always believed. And we can tell that many of the faithful continue to believe this, too, as they understand the need to be reconciled with God before death, regardless of the risk. The goal is always to provide the spiritual assistance of the sacraments, while reducing as much as possible the risk to physical health. But, if we tried to eliminate every possible risk to our physical health, we would have to stop providing the sacraments, and that is something that we simply cannot do. So, no matter how much we try to protect the health of our bodies, we know it’s always more important to protect the health of our souls. And, *please God*, this is something that we will always do, here at St. Julie’s.