

Some of the hardest things I think for all of us as we deal with the coronavirus pandemic is the isolation, the fear, and the anxiety. For instance right now, I'm once again offering Mass in a mostly-empty sanctuary, and I know many who are watching are hurting that they can't be here at Church today to receive Holy Communion, but also to see the other members of the community who help us on our journey to God. I know it pains me greatly not to see the people here, and to be with them.

Isolation is augmented right now, but it's something we can feel outside of pandemics too. There's the isolation that can be caused by our sins; or the isolation of an addiction, or of suffering silently with something. There's the isolation that can come from fear as it paralyzes us. But then there is the voice of God that is there to dispel this fear, and to bring us back to life, and to restore us to one another. We hear it in this week's Gospel when Jesus rises Lazarus. But we also hear it in the voices of so many people up and down through the ages who, using the love of God in them, have done so much to restore people to life.

Years ago, the plague of leprosy had the terrible effect of isolating people forever. And in the Hawaiian islands, there was one specifically that was set up for people to go to who had this disease, the island of Molokai, forever cut off from the world, until a priest, Fr. Damien, courageously went to these people to restore them to hope, and dispel their fears by becoming one of them.

He had a huge compassion for lepers, and so he spent 16 years living in a human graveyard where people were neglected and forgotten, and in the process he did not cure leprosy, but he won many souls for Christ.

Born Jozef “Jef” De Veuster, he took the name of Damian from the first saint Damian. After his ordination, he landed in Honolulu. Here he served in various parishes and he became aware of the high mortality rate among the population due to various diseases brought in from the Chinese and the Europeans. Among these was leprosy, which terrified people at the time. By the mid 20th century it would be cured, but in the 19th century, much like in Biblical times, if one had it, they were put in colonies to be kept out of sight and out of mind. Hawaii passed a law at the time to do just that.

Fr. Damian was certainly aware of these people; they asked for a priest, and so the local bishop looked for volunteers. He didn't want anyone to be forced to go out of obedience. He didn't have to stay. In fact his assignment letter said “you may stay as long as your devotion dictates.” But he knew that would be for as long as he was able to. The son of farmers, he knew what commitment was about - his parents committed to the hard work of farming, and Fr. Damian committed to harvesting souls. He volunteered and was tasked with starting the mission.

People there were neglected; the government had promised to help but it became a low priority. And for so many, life was miserable. The government came would separate families with cruelty, forcing people into boats. In February of 1873, hundreds, many who could not walk, others

who could barely crawl, were dumped at Molokai while the ship's crew looked on with horror.

There was no harbor, no dock. The captain and crew, afraid to bring the vessel too close to the rocky beach, drove and hurled the lepers into the surf. Some drowned. Others miraculously survived. On torn and bleeding feet they stumbled up on the harsh volcanic rock, numb and cold.

There was no one to greet them. No one to warm them. Many survived the pounding surf only to die from exhaustion on the inhospitable beach. There was little food. Others told the newly arrived to forget home. All of them were condemned. They might as well reach for whatever wild joys they could possess before merciful death claimed them; and this led as you might expect to a lot of sinful actions. "In this place," a man advised one of the newly arrived, "there is no law." As such, sin became rampant too; sexual immorality, brawling, robberies, drunkenness, fueled by liquor made from tree roots, characterized the lives of lepers. Nobody cared. When lepers died, their poor bodies were thrown into graves so shallow that pigs and dogs grew fat feasting on their flesh.

Over about a decade, 799 lepers arrived at this place. And so did Fr. Damien. But he decided to replace fear with hope and love.

The bishop went with him and presented the priest to them, and something new happened: joy from people. All he had was a prayer book, and his rectory was the shelter of a pandanus tree near the church. Also staying

there were centipedes, scorpions, ants, roaches and fleas. But he added a wing and with the help of others built a small place to stay.

As for the lepers, they were ravaged by the disease; they were coughing constantly, and there was a horrible smell. But none of this bothered Fr. Damien. Even when doctors were reluctant to visit for fear of being contaminated, Fr. Damien was always there with the people.

He wanted to restore in people a sense of worth and dignity. He did this by showing them the value of each life. He fenced in the cemetery to protect graves from pigs and dogs. He built coffins and dug graves, and organized the Christian Burial Association to provide for a proper funeral. He ministered to people by bringing them the Sacraments of confession and Communion. He washed their bodies, bandaged wounds, and tried to make their lives comfortable.

He also got people involved. The lepers helped build a road, and blasted rocks to open a docking facility. He taught people how to farm, raise animals, to play musical instruments and sing. He even formed a leper band to play music. Because of him, dignity and joy replaced despair and loneliness. An American writer who visited in 1868, five years before Fr. Damien, observed a place of miserable huts; when he came back in 1884 he saw a place with two villages of white houses with flower gardens and cultivated fields, along with a hospital, graveyard and two orphanages. What he was most struck by were the people though, who actually had hope; instead of waiting around to die, he saw them out horseback riding. Another Englishman observed "I had gone to Molokai expecting to find it

scarcely less dreadful than hell itself...but the cheerful people, the lovely landscapes and comparatively painless life were all surprises. These poor people seemed singularly happy.”

While he lived among them, got to know them, and helped them, Fr. Damian also taught people the faith. Sunday Mass was a priority in the colony. But the people were a priority for Fr. Damian far beyond Sunday. He touched the lepers, embraced them, and placed the host on their mouth. He knew touch was necessary to communicate love; the Hawaiians knew this, and often European and American missionaries didn't - which is why so few joined their churches. He wanted to actually identify with the people. Eventually this caused him to contract the disease.

And with the physical suffering that followed, all through this there was the emotional suffering too. For even before he got sick, Fr. Damian was essentially alone with the lepers. There wasn't another priest with him there. People were too afraid to visit; he even had to make a confession to a bishop on a boat by humbly yelling his sins to the bishop as the ship's captain would not let him board. When he contracted the disease, his bishop told him not to come to Honolulu for if he did he'd be in a private room alone, and no one would say Mass with him as they would not want to touch the chalice or receive Communion from his hands. Though he did go to Honolulu to set things up for sisters to come to minister to the orphaned girls on the colony, the loneliness was horrible; he said being rejected by his own order was the greatest pain in his life he ever experienced. And even some others in his order and other Protestant missionaries were jealous that his good work was making them look bad

But through it all, Fr. Damien served as a witness to the faith. People finally began to see his incredible good, and he inspired a civil war vet to come for 44 years and work with the people, and finally another priest arrived not too long before Fr. Damien died, as did some nuns to run a girls orphanage. But despite this, to put it mildly, his last years were horrific, as he suffered the emotional abandonment of being rejected by his order, and the physical pain of the disease on his body.

Today, he is seen as a hero of our faith, having been beatified in 1995. And what strikes me with his story, is that what you see in him is what you see Jesus doing in this Gospel, namely restoring people to life. And that happens on multiple fronts.

The first is dispelling the fear. Think of the terror these people must have endured; maybe you are enduring it right now as you think about the unknown of the Corona Virus. Yesterday in an address to the world, Pope Francis reflected on the Gospel of the disciples being caught in the storm, where Jesus is asleep and they beg him to stop the storm. He is asleep because he has that complete trust that things will be okay; and he awakens and says “why are you afraid, have you no faith?” The holy father points out that the apostles simply have to trust in the Lord, for “with Him on board there will be no shipwreck” and God’s strength is to turn to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things, because God “brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.” If you look at the crucifix behind me, you’ll see that it’s covered - a Catholic tradition we do for the last 2 weeks of Lent to help us think a little more about the nature of Jesus and His love for us more deeply as we approach Holy Week. And

if in the midst of all of this, maybe the presence of God is hidden from you because of the fear that has covered Him, let go and let God, and know He will see you through the storm.

The second is dispelling the separation that comes from sin. Fr. Damien helped the people to grow spiritually, and what sin can do is to cause spiritual death. Lazarus in the tomb symbolizes a person who is dead spiritually; cut off from others. The sins in the colony had separated the people from one another, but the love of God restores them. The Holy Father also said yesterday: "Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: "Be converted!", "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others." So what in our life needs to change? Do we hear the voice of Jesus calling us to come out, to come out of the tomb of despair, of addiction, of shame, of feeling like a failure, or whatever it might be? We must remember that while we lose our way at times in life, God is always seeking us out. So if there's something in your life you fear or causes you shame, hear that voice of Jesus calling you out of your tomb.

Lastly, like Father Damien, we have the power to help others out of the tomb. The Holy Father went on to say yesterday: "We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have

reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: “That they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.” The power of love can’t be underestimated. Right now, you may know someone who is afraid because of the Corona Virus, or they are afraid of what the future holds, or maybe they are afraid of something in their past or something they can’t seem to defeat on their own. You have the power though to liberate by reaching out to them. Never forget the power of the simple actions of love and mercy. So let us open our eyes to seek out those people who are hurting, because while we might not be able to cure a virus, we can restore to life a soul that is suffering from fear and anxiety.

What really strikes you with this Gospel is how God becomes one of us. We are told Jesus wept. He recognizes the pain of Martha and Mary. And Jesus restores him to life, bringing him back to them, and since family and friends await us also in the life to come, death is no longer something to fear, for God's purpose is seen in his reunion. God has a purpose for Lazarus, and God has a purpose for you and me too. On our part, as the pope said, we are not self-sufficient; we need the Lord like the ancient navigators needed the stars, so now is the time to let Jesus into the boats of our lives. But when we let God into our lives, as the pope says there is no shipwreck with him on board, because he turns to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God, life never dies.

As Pope Francis says, "We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love...embracing the cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, and embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope, that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear, and gives us hope." Fr. Damien unlike so many others didn't embrace fear; he embraced the cross, and he suffered with his people just as we suffer together now. And in the end, he did not cure leprosy and it took his body. But it could not take his soul, because hope and love were far more powerful. And that love liberated the people of Molokai and brought them out of the tomb that they had been put in. In these times, sometimes fear takes over for me too not knowing what

tomorrow will bring. Like all of us I desperately want things to be back to normal, and to be with people at Mass again at church. Right now it's hard to see the light in the storm. But when the apostles were on that boat in the storm, Jesus was asleep in the stern, the part of the boat that sinks first, completely at peace trusting in the Father and then eventually calming the storm. Our God is indeed one of us; he weeps with us, he mourns with us, and He loves us more than we can ever imagine. "O my people I will open your graves and have you rise from them" we hear from Ezekiel. Whatever grave you are in, the grave of fear, the grave of isolation, the grave of sin, the grave of anxiety, hear the voice of Jesus calling you to come out, and know that He will see you through the storm, and then help others to untie the burial bands that bind them. With Jesus, we are not left in the tomb, and may His words, His presence, bring us all the comfort and peace we long for. For no matter what life brings, He will be with us every step of the way.