

Fr. Terrance Klein, a priest writing in “America” magazine, a couple of years ago wrote a reflection on Charlie Brown and his constant attempts to kick a football.

She did it first on Nov. 16, 1952. Charlie Brown explains to Lucy: “All you have to do is hold the ball. Then I come running and kick it.”

She’s not so sure. “I don’t know if this is such a good idea.”

Charlie Brown comes running, but, at the last moment, Lucy pulls back the football, explaining to the prostrate kicker: “I was afraid your shoes might be dirty, Charlie Brown. I don’t want anyone with dirty shoes kicking my new football.”

He tells her: “Don’t you ever do that again! Do you want to kill me? This time, hold it tight!” She does, so tightly, he kicks a ball, which doesn’t move, and tumbles onto his back.

“I held it real tight, Charlie Brown.”

He laments: “I’m not going to get up. I’m going to lie here for the rest of the day.”

Lucy would continue some variant of the football snatch in almost every subsequent year of the strip, all the way to 1999. The same would happen nine times in animation. Drawing the strip for the last time, Charles Schultz said that he realized, sadly, that Charlie Brown would never kick that football, but, he also thought, having him succeed would have been a disservice to the character.

Why is that? Perhaps because Charlie Brown is something of an everyman, and trying to kick that football reveals who he is. Depending on your perspective, either he will not learn from the past or he refuses to give up on the future. For the Christian, it’s the latter, which is what makes Charlie Brown something of a Christ-figure: He doesn’t close in upon himself; he doesn’t give up on others; he lives in hope.

We all need a bit of that these days don’t we? If you’ve watched some disaster movies, sometimes one of the things you see is people fighting one another in a desperate attempt to survive. But in real life disasters, the selflessness of people is incredible.

For instance in New York, in a Clinton Hill 12-building complex with 1,200 units, tenants are reactivating a network where each building has captains and some floor-leaders who will field requests and concerns from elderly or vulnerable tenants—and connect them to a flock of able-bodied volunteers who can help.

“If a neighbor needs some support getting groceries or something else, they can contact their building captain and they can be connected to one of the 60, and growing, number of volunteers we have ready to support,” explained 38-year-old Heather Benjamin, one of the complex’s organizers.

Barbara Abrams, 75, is the captain of her building. She prides herself on knowing everyone in its more than one hundred units, and while she's been looking out for her neighbors for decades, she believes that sense of shared community is even more vital in moments of crisis.

"We feed off of each other," she said. "It helps a lot to know that your neighbors are here and you're supporting them and they're supporting you in the same manner." What's happening in Clinton Hill is taking place in ad hoc ways all over the city: neighborhood-specific Google documents, spreadsheets, and Slack channels are all sharing resources and offering help in ways large and small. There are crowdfunding campaigns for undocumented restaurant workers and low-income artists; there's even a crew of bike messengers called the "corona couriers."

One resident, Kevin LaCherra, 29, who works for the state court system, created a Google spreadsheet where North Brooklyn residents are listing their names and addresses and what they can contribute. Almost overnight, several hundred people had signed up.

"Every time I look at it it's growing," he said. "Folks that are available to shop, check-in via Skype or a telephone call, [describe] their transportation capacity... whether they have a car, a van, a bicycle, a cargo bike, what their language skills are...and then all sorts of things—special education teachers and therapists and folks who are healthcare workers... it really runs the gamut."

These kinds of things are happening all over the world. A UK woman created a postcard for her elderly neighbors who are self-isolating; it was put in their box, and asked them for their name, number, and if they could use help with shopping, mail, or just needed a phone call. A Muslim couple in Scotland helped the local community needs by arranging relief packages and delivering them around for free. Stance, a young man, helped an elderly man at a CVS when he met him there who told him he'd been looking all day for toilet paper at stores for he and his sick wife. He walked him to his car, where his wife was with her oxygen tank, but an hour later, he did track down some toilet paper for them. And Rebecca Mehra from Oregon was walking into a grocery store when an elderly woman rolled down a window and said she and her husband were afraid to go into the store; Rebecca went in and got groceries for them.

And right here at Saint Joes, I've seen the amazing response of people. This past week, our staff met a few times. Our incredible principal, Kelly Roche, has been on the front lines working to communicate to school families and work with teachers about how we can continue learning even if we can't be together in the building. Our staff has been reaching out to people in need in the parish, calling people to check in and make sure they are okay. And then there has been the response of the parishioners too. As you might imagine, with the obligation to come to Mass suspended, and now no Masses, I was greatly concerned about the state of our finances. I still am. But despite the sharp decline in attendance last week, people continued to support our parish through

donations mailed in and given online. Time and time again, people never cease to amaze me in how they live out the virtue of love and hope.

In our second reading this week, Paul writes “you were once in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for light produces every kind of goodness.” And in the Gospel, we meet the blind man who wants to see, and comes to believe in Jesus who restores his sight.

We all want to see, the problem is sometimes in life, it’s hard to see past the darkness. So what are we to do at a time when we are enduring so much in our world? Where is the hope?

For starters, we can go back to Christmas Eve, when we heard the words at Mass “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Jesus came to show us how much we are loved by God in that God became one of us; a frail infant born in a manger, and He lived a life to show us how much God stands with us, not as some distant God, but as a God who knows what suffering is all about. He gave His life for us all, and still stands with us through our pains.

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian who was a POW after World War II. He was conscripted as a teenager into the German Nazi Air Force and almost died in the bombing of Hamburg. Afterward, at 18 or 19 years old, he was put into a POW camp for three years.

In the camp, an American chaplain gave him a Bible. He came across the psalms of lament first, and then Mark’s account of Jesus’ passion. He said something along the lines of, “When I read Jesus’ death cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ I realized this is someone who understands me, and I came to understand him.”

Moltmann says the “why” question that theodicy tries to answer is like an open wound that you have to learn to live with. It’s one of the most important questions of human history, and yet it exists like an open wound that you can’t cure. But sometimes faith enables you to live with that open wound.

So rather than trying to answer the question of why, theologians today say that the more important question for us is where: “Where do I find God in suffering?” And it’s here that the Christian story of the cross and resurrection has something to say. Though the Christmas event, the Incarnation, God chose to save us by coming into this world, and save from within, rather than sending armies from heaven to come marching in. In Christ, God enters into our suffering.

For another, we see how so many people are the light of Christ to so many. Fr. Richard Leonard, who wrote the incredible book “Where the Hell is God,” a reflection on how he dealt with his sister’s accident and addressed the problem of suffering in the world writes: “every moment of every day, God does what He did on Good Friday, not to allow evil, death and destruction to have the last word, but to ennoble humanity with an

extraordinary resilience, and through the power of amazing grace, to enable us to make the most of even the worst situations and let light and life have the last word. Easter Sunday is God's response to Good Friday: life out of death." The point is that through our suffering, we see the amazing good that is in so many people to help one another. Right now, we see solidarity - of people not looking at races, religions, political affiliation, but just seeing people in need, and doing something about it. Jesus did the same thing, standing with people, which is why we shouldn't just look at how He died, but how He lived: as a beacon of love and hope. You have the power to do just that. You can call someone or talk to them via FaceTime or the computer if you can't be in the same room right now. You can pray for those in need. You can go shopping for someone who can't leave their home. And even your generosity in continuing to give to our parish family does so much too so we can continue our ministries here at Saint Joseph's. Even if you can't give what you normally do, know every penny you give continues to do so much as we use it to serve the people of our parish family.

Third, hopefully we can see some silver linings too in the midst of our suffering. As Fr. Richard put it, it may be God limits his power and doesn't intervene all the time. He does not go on vacation, or take a nap – meaning it's not like He was not there on 9/11 or during the Holocaust or when Joan died. God is our companion, and there is no dark or ugly side to God. So why, then, do bad things still happen to us? It could be, as Fr. Richard points out, that it is because God limits His power. He uses the example of a loving parent of a 17-year old. Part of them wants to shield their child from the pain of the world and intervene at the first hint of trouble. But if they do that, their son or daughter will be immature as they progress through late adolescence and have a stunted growth. Every parent knows there is a point where they have to let their child make their own decisions and stop intervening – and it can be heartbreaking for the parents. But they do not do this because they do not care, but rather because they love their children to accept that their adult child needs to know they are supported and have their parent's companionship as they explore their own world. Turning it back to our relationship with God, we are not God's puppets – God wants us to achieve our full potential, and He could keep intervening, but chooses not to. I do not worship a God who says "I need to cause suffering on thousands and have many die to make a point so I'll give them Corona Virus," but rather a God who stands with us, but also lets us to be the miracle for so many. Think of the doctors, the paramedics, the people on the front lines of this disease; the people doing the shopping for strangers, of keeping people connected. These are the lights of hope in darkness. And it could be from this, we emerge stronger as a world, realizing that human connection and solidarity means so much more, things we have forgotten about in a divisive world where we can be so busy at times and separated from one another.

These days, I feel a bit like Charlie Brown every morning. And I feel like I keep missing that football. I get up, and I turn on the news on my phone. I go through my Twitter feed. And I keep hoping to read "curve flattens." I hope for an email saying public Masses are on again, with precautions. I hope that cases are dropping. It's not happening yet. And sometimes the fear and the questions can take over. How will we recover? What will happen to our parish? Can we keep providing ministries and our staff going? I ruminate,

I get fearful, my mind starts going around and around. But then I realize the future isn't in my control, but God is with me. And I see the good that people do; the love they show for one another and their parish. And that good, that light in the darkness comes because people are not blind, but they see. They see the power of good in the face of evil, and they do something about it.

The final football gag appeared in the strip on Oct. 24, 1999. At the last moment, Lucy is called away, but she asks her brother Rerun to play the trick on Charlie Brown for her. Back in the house, she asks him: "What happened? Did you pull the ball away? Did he kick it? What happened?"

He replies, "You'll never know."

As Fr. Terrance puts it: It is, after all, the great question that life poses. Am I a Charlie Brown or a Lucy? Do I love and give as God does, as Christ did? Or do I, at the last moment, pull back into myself? I like to think Charlie Brown did kick that football, because, like Jesus, he never gave up. God never gives up on us, which is why He became one of us. May we never give up on hope and realize that it is OK to be scared. It's OK to be angry, even at God sometimes like Job was. But when the darkness seems to blind us to the good and the presence of God, may we open our eyes, and like that blind man say "I do believe Lord," believing in God and the power of love and hope. Corona Virus may win the battle and the headlines today. And it may win them tomorrow. But no matter how long I say Mass alone in front of a camera, no matter how many challenging moments may be ahead, together you and I and the world will kick that football that is this virus along with the other Good Friday moments that are ahead, because looks are deceiving. "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart" are the words from Samuel. So look deeper, into your heart, and the hearts of so many, and see the good. Look at the host as I elevate it at the altar, and see Jesus with you and me. And look around and see this hope and good that will ultimately triumph, because God isn't Lucy pulling away the football. God is Charlie Brown never giving up on the future. As Fr. Terrance puts it: "Humans become most truly themselves when we strive to imitate God, when we love and give, when we love to give, when we give love." May God's love be given to you in this trying time, and never forget the power you have to give love to so many, something far more powerful than an invisible enemy called Corona Virus, namely the power of hope.