

HOMILY FOR FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR B

February 8, 2009

(Job 7:1-4, 6-7; 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; Mark 1:29-39)

SEND AN S-O-S TO GOD!

It's been fifty years ago now that the Great Flood of 1959 occurred. It happened in January of that year. There had been a lot of snow. Then suddenly the weather got significantly warmer followed by heavy rains. It seemed like all the rivers and streams in Ohio overflowed their banks. Among them was Alum Creek and among the places flooded was Saint Charles High School where I was a sophomore at the time. The good news was that the flood interrupted finals week. The bad news was that it devastated the school. This all happened before the creek was dammed and the Alum Creek Reservoir was created. There was no warning and, although the students were gone in the evening when the waters came up, many priests and sisters who lived and served at St. Charles were stranded in the cold and dark building. Fortunately, there was no loss of life at the school – as there was in other parts of Columbus and throughout the state. But the priests and sisters awaited rescue.

One of the priests who took charge of the rescue operation was Fr. Larry O'Brien, an eccentric priest who taught Religion and whom we called "OB." For some reason, Fr. O'Brien thought that the fire and police rescue squads on the west side of the swollen creek were unaware of the fact that people were stranded in the building. The phones had gone out and it was, of course, way before cell phones were invented. So OB went up on the roof and with a big flashlight sent out what he thought was an S-O-S to the rescue team across the water. The boats came shortly and began to evacuate the nuns. One of the firemen told Fr. O'Brien that he needed to brush up on his Morse code because he had mistakenly sent out an O-S-O signal instead of an S-O-S. And so this story passed into the lore of St. Charles Preparatory School and we tell it to this day at our high school reunions.

OB's S-O-S was not the only one sent out as the result of the Flood of '59. I remember well that some Dads came to visit our home one night on behalf of the school to ask for donations to replace damaged stuff, especially all the equipment that was lost since the science labs were all on the basement floor. In addition after the waters receded, the priests asked students to come back to volunteer in the clean-up process. I did so and remember that I got my picture in the *Dispatch* which did an article on the post-flood work at St. Charles. Although it was a sickening mess and mud was everywhere, we actually had a lot of fun helping out because we were young and foolish and full of energy.

Of course, St. Charles survived and flourishes to this day.

During Jesus' time, people were constantly sending out S-O-S's to him. Jesus is the great healer – and this is abundantly clear in St. Mark's Gospel where the Lord is busy caring for all kinds of sick folks. In today's passage, Jesus heals Peter's mother in law and then proceeds to do the same for many other people who showed up at Peter's house that evening. Jesus did all kinds of repair work and clean-up jobs in his ministry

Mark says that people "brought" the ill to Jesus. We do this all the time for ourselves and for each other when we lift our lives up in prayer, which is really an S-O-S

to God. There is a saying among Christians, “Take it to the Lord in prayer!” This saying reminds us to pray always – to be a walking prayer and to practice the presence of God at all times.

It is easy to get out of the habit of praying. But we never stop needing Jesus the Healer. And so we need to be in communication with him every day and, indeed, several times a day in prayer. Someone has said that people at times regard religion as being like the “ambulance corps” rather than the “firing line” of life. This means that there is a constant temptation to wait until there is a crisis or until we have made a mess of things before we turn to Jesus in prayer. Of course, it is good to pray in a crisis – I heard that the priests and sisters at St. Charles prayed a lot before their rescue (and we students used to joke that they probably prayed all the harder when they saw Fr. OB trying to get up on the roof). But we are most fulfilled as humans and as Christians when we pray ceaselessly. Only Jesus can give us what we need for life – whether sick or well. God is not someone to be used when misfortune strikes; he is someone to be loved and remembered every day of our lives. He is always seeking to heal and comfort us and repair us. So our whole lives should be an S-O-S to the God who is always ready to rescue us from sin and any other evil – if we will let him.

Prayer will never do our work for us. But what it will do is to strengthen us for the work that we are called to do – like the clean-up in the Flood of '59. We, like children, humbly accept God's blessings of healing and all the rest of his blessings – but then we in turn become a blessing and healer to our neighbors. In today's gospel, Mark tells us that Peter's mother in law served Jesus and his companions after he healed her of her fever. One of the noble families of Scotland has the motto “Saved to serve.” As long as God gives us health and breath, it is our vocation to be of help to the community and especially to the lowly.

In a way, prayer is just the beginning of our calling as friends of Christ. Jesus himself never separated his words from his actions. He preached healing and then he healed people. He encouraged people to be holy and then he lived a holy life. Christians are meant to be active in good works and not just talk about them. The great American Protestant clergyman, Harry Fosdick, who lived in the first half of the twentieth century, tells of a student who bought the best possible books and the best possible equipment and got a special study chair with a special book rest to make study easy, and then sat down in the chair – and promptly fell asleep! When our deeds do not match our words, we are like that sleepy-head student.

So we “take it to the Lord in prayer.” And we are open to his gifts of healing and to all his graces. And we become a gift and the channel of grace and healing to others. But above all, we trust God and his Son Jesus with our lives. I had no idea how blessed I was to have a Catholic education when I was young. But I know it now! I am so glad that I was able to get off my duff and go out to St. Charles for those couple of weeks when we were cleaning it up and, in effect, helping to “heal” it. We kids answered the S-O-S that came our way and we helped to repair our school. There is much repair work and healing to be done in our parish and community and world. We cannot do it without the help of Jesus who comes instantly to us when we pray. We made fun of eccentric Fr. O'Brien because we were dumb kids, but it is interesting that in the tale about his S-O-S, the firemen's boats started across the swollen creek as soon as he sent out the signal. The signal may have been garbled, but it worked. Maybe sometimes our prayer is awkward or

difficult or maybe we don't even feel like praying. But it is important to keep it up because God hears us and he instantly will send healing and repair and help our way. This is what he did most dramatically when he sent his Son to us when the big fat S-O-S of our sinfulness demanded a healing and loving response.

We have all been "saved to serve!" Peter's mother in law got up and served her company. We students at St. Charles served our school. All of us have many reasons to serve because we have been saved in so many ways – especially through the power of Jesus Christ who has taken away our sins so that we may humbly bring healing and help to all around us.