

THANKSGIVING 2010

(Sirach 50: 22-24; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9; Luke 17: 11-19)

THANK YOU, GOD, FOR LIFE

People often talk about having a best friend. My best friend growing up was John. We came from somewhat different backgrounds, but we shared a lot too. We were best friends from about the second grade. We ended up going to different Catholic high schools which, if anything, strengthened our relationship. We went to Ohio State together and this was a memorable time. John majored in finance while I studied history. As I said, we were different in our tastes and interests. We both enjoyed playing sports, but they were completely different sports. We were both faithful Mass servers. We also had in common a love of reading and movies and the adventure of travel. We did some trips together to New York City and elsewhere before life parted us; I went off to graduate school in Minnesota and John went way out west to make his fortune. When I decided to become a priest, I went to seminary in D.C., but came home to Ohio for vacations. It was on one of these breaks that my brother told me John had Lou Gehrig's disease. My brother was a mail carrier and one of his stops was John's parents' home in our old neighborhood. John's Dad told my brother the tough news.

I got in touch with my friend John right away and I kept up with him throughout his illness. As he got sicker, I began to have a hard time with his suffering. One day I was able to have a long conversation with him and expressed my feelings about what was happening to him and how I had even begun to question God. John very patiently and, I thought, courageously, told me that he had come to terms with the "hand" he had been dealt (as he put it) and that he trusted God would take care of him. I will never forget that talk! Here I was a seminarian and I had doubts, but John the big investment banker was at peace. I have a saying that many people who know me have heard me say frequently and that is: "get over it!" I say this to myself as well as to others. As I look back on it, the conversation with John that we had so long ago was the origin of my "get over it" remarks. If John could rise above this terrible illness, why could I not put my relatively small problems in perspective?

I had the honor of celebrating John's funeral a year after I was ordained a priest. I subsequently had both of his parents' funerals as well. I considered this ministry to him and his family pure gift.

Today is the day we celebrate the very distinctive American Holiday of Thanksgiving. Of course, I am as grateful as I can be for my friendship with John and the many other strong and beautiful friendships God had given me – not to speak of my supportive and loving family relationships for which I am most thankful. Of course, I am grateful for many other people and things – including my faith, my ministry, and my country. John and I both shared a kind of sober patriotism even though we had very different political beliefs– and it is my conviction that the different viewpoints that Americans have make America stronger and not weaker.

Ultimately it is important just to express thanks to God for everything we have because he is the author of all we have (and most of us have an abundance). That is why it is good we are here today. Today's Gospel from Luke underscores how important it is to utter the word of thanks. There were ten lepers

and only one came back to thank Christ and this was the foreigner Samaritan whom Jesus' fellow Jews would have hated. But in expressing gratitude, this man received the gift of faith along with his gift of healing and his act of Thanksgiving brought him closer to his Savior. When we are grateful to God, we get to know him better and we grow in humility which is the close companion of faith. I am always a little surprised that more people don't come to Mass on Thanksgiving in this country and I would dare say that fewer than one in ten of our parishioners are here today. But in the end, I have to take my own advice once again and "get over it" because it is great to see all of you and to share this time of gratefulness with you around the table of the Eucharist which, after all, means "Thanksgiving" in Greek. Thanks to all of you for being here!

As John's illness progressed, he would sometimes say something like: "Today I am just thankful that it is easy for me to breathe." So, in memory of John, that's where I always start when I am giving thanks – especially on Thanksgiving Day. Life is a precious gift from God; all the rest is gravy. And I assume that that is why all of you showed up today too. God has given us a share in his own life; and through his son, Jesus Christ, our brother, he offers us forgiveness and eternal life with the One who loves us more than we can ever imagine. That is the big picture of our human life and our Christian life – the gift of being the image of God and of sharing everything with him. My friend John taught me not to sweat the small stuff. There is too much big stuff to challenge and excite us. When we are not petty, we are more like sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. And when we have big hearts, we are also oh so much more aware of all that we have to be thankful for. Rest in peace, John! And Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!