

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent - C  
Zephaniah 3:14-18a;  
Philippians 4:4-7;  
Luke 3:10-18  
Little Flower - 12/13/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete Sunday. The Latin word *gaudete* means *rejoice*. At the midpoint of Advent, we rejoice because the coming of the Lord is near. Today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians captures the spirit of the day: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice.... The Lord is near.*" As a sign of rejoicing, the color of both the vestments and the third candle of the Advent wreath is rose.

According to Pope Francis, the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy is, first of all, about God's mercy to us. If we read today's readings through the lens of mercy, all three readings proclaim God's merciful love. The Prophet Zephaniah proclaimed to the people of Israel, "*The LORD has removed the judgment against you, he has turned away your enemies; The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear.*" John the Baptist announced to his listeners the good news of Christ's impending arrival. Paul wrote to the Philippians that we should rejoice always because the Lord is near, which can be understood as returning soon or as already present among us.

God's mercy, therefore, is much more than God's forgiveness. God's mercy is, first of all, his gift of himself and, therefore, his presence among us. Of course, the greatest gift of his mercy is the gift of his own Son, Jesus Christ, the one who makes all love possible.

In last Sunday's Gospel, we heard that John the Baptist "*went throughout (the) whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" In today's Gospel, John spelled out for them what repentance might look like. Again, if we read this Gospel through the lens of mercy, i.e., what God is calling us to do to become merciful, Pope Francis is correct in suggesting that we as individuals and as a Church need to become more welcoming.

To become more welcoming as individuals and as a Church, we have to take to heart Jesus' words in the Gospels: "*Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned*" [Lk. 6:37]. According to Pope Francis, to become merciful toward others, we need to recognize our own need for God's mercy. As Jesus said to those who were going to stone the woman caught in the very act of adultery, "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her*" [Jn. 8:7]. The Gospel tells us that they all left, beginning with the eldest, who presumably had the most need for forgiveness or at least most recognized their own need for forgiveness.

Although Little Flower is a welcoming community, there is so much more we could do. As I have said several times recently, we need greeters at the doors who are especially attentive to welcoming those whom they do not recognize. We all need to take more initiative in greeting those near us in church whether or not we know them. Likewise, it is important that we not say or do anything that makes people feel unwelcome, especially individuals or families with young children or young people in general. The more we actively participate during Mass, the more we make our community inviting. We can invite family or friends or even neighbors or co-workers to come to Mass with us. Christmas offers a great opportunity to invite others to join us, especially those who may not have a church home.

My brothers and sisters, the mercy of God is, first of all, God's gift of himself to us. Our response to that gift is to recognize and welcome Christ within and among us and to welcome and invite others to share God's gift of himself, which we celebrate in a special way at Christmas.