

My Brothers and Sisters,

The Sunday Old Testament readings this Lent have all been about covenant. In today's reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, God promises a new covenant: "*The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*" Jesus himself, human and divine, is the New Covenant, the new relationship of love between God and us. The New Covenant was sealed in Christ's blood. As Jesus said at the Last Supper, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you*" [Luke 22:20].

Through Jeremiah, God said, "*I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts.*" If the basis of the Old Testament covenant was God's promises to Israel and Israel's observance of the Law, the new covenant was a covenant of grace, i.e., a covenant based on the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's love given to us as gift. The Holy Spirit is the law written upon our hearts.

In human relationships, the best test of love or friendship is that the two people consistently call forth the best in each other. However, this call to become the-best-version-of-themselves always comes from outside each other. God's call to us to become the-best-version-of-ourselves comes from within. God's love calls forth the best in us within our hearts. As someone once wrote, there is someone nearer to me than I am to myself. Grace, the gift of God's love, uncreated grace, is the gift of the Holy Spirit within us calling forth the best in us. The transformative impact of the Holy Spirit upon us is created grace. The Holy Spirit and its impact on us are our relationship with God: "*I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*"

John's Gospel differs from the other Gospels in a number of ways. For example, John's Gospel does not mention Jesus' agony in the garden. Today's Gospel is John's equivalent of the agony in the garden. Also, today's reading from Hebrews could apply to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "*In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death...*" In the garden Jesus prayed, "*'Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.'* (...He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground.)" [Lk. 22:42,44]. Jesus, we are told, learned obedience from what he suffered.

Nobody likes pain; nobody likes suffering. Unfortunately, pain and suffering are part of everyone's life. When I was young, we were told to offer up our pain and suffering to God. As strange as that may sound to us today, it has a very biblical basis. St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church*" [Colossians 1:24]. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote something to the effect, "Unmerited suffering borne in love is salvific." If we look at today's second reading and what Paul wrote to the Colossians, our suffering can be salvific both for us and for others.

My brothers and sisters, during Lent, we enter into the mystery of Christ's suffering and death in order to rise to new life with Christ on Easter. We do this by putting to death the selfishness and sinfulness in our lives through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. However, the most beautiful, the most comforting, the most important words in today's readings are in the final verse of the first reading: "*I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.*" God not only forgives; he also forgets, which means he lets go of our sins and does not hold them against us. Our God is a God of second chances.