

Homily051919

HAPPINESS, LONELINESS AND OUR CATHOLIC FAITH

Economically, America is more prosperous than it has ever been. We are richer, more connected, electronically, and have more information available to us than ever before. And yet, we are in the midst of a crisis that is claiming thousands of American lives: the crisis is the crisis of loneliness. Recently here at Saint Anthony's we had a two hour program on opioid overdoses and what can be done to save lives. We had between 40 and 50 people attend. Those are big numbers for a parish program in May.

Since the turn of the century, Americans have been dying from suicide, alcohol-related illnesses, and drug overdoses at a rate that has never before been seen. In fact, suicide is now the second leading cause of death for American teenagers. In 2017 alone, approximately 47,000 Americans committed suicide, and over 70,000 individuals died of a drug overdose. To put these number into perspective, 40,000 Americans died in motor vehicles accident during that same year. Drug overdose is the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of fifty. Since 2015, our nation's average life expectancy has been declining. This suggests that the toll of American unhappiness, loneliness and even despair can no longer be outpaced by technological or medical advancements.

People want to be happy. The choices we make we make because they are right or because we think they will make us happy. But there are signs that, despite growing prosperity, there are a growing number of unhappy and lonely people in America. There are studies beginning to emerge helping us to understand. What makes for happiness in people's lives? Some clear signs

You have family you love, and who loves you.

You have friends you trust and confide in.

You have work that matters.

You live in a way that benefits your neighbors.

You have a way of looking at life that can make sense of suffering and death.

You have some of those things in your life or all those things in your life then the likelihood of your being happy and not lonely increase exponentially.

There was a recent Harvard research study that followed 89,000 women over a 15-year period in order to understand the relationship between religion and suicide. Results showed that Catholic women who attended Mass weekly had a suicide rate that was one-half that of the general population. Of the 7,000 Catholic women who attended Mass more than once a week, not a single one committed suicide during the 15 years of the study. They were very interested in the why of this.

When we think about our relationship with God, for a long time we saw that as a vertical relationship. God above us, us down here. But when the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth he established God's presence in the horizontal dimension of our lives. It is the "horizontal" component of the Catholic faith that ties us to a real-life, hold-hands-and-pray-together community. This community is rich with all kinds of relationships founded on a shared biblical appreciation of the human person with our greatness, flaws and sins, as well as the importance of forgiveness. Psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck said: "When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there

through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word: ‘glory.’”

Jesus in the gospel for today says as He is about to enter into his defining passion: “Now does the Son of Man receive glory and God is glorified in him. I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.” And just how did he love them? With a humility that was not self-centered, with a compassion and a care and a patience, with a willingness to get into the boat with them and stay there when things got rough. Our faith in Jesus Christ does not promise a life free from suffering. Instead, it helps us find purpose in and guidance through suffering. Believing in Jesus Christ instills a sense of meaning and purpose that goes way beyond the present struggle; it allows people to survive anguish and find meaning in suffering. I have seen this first-hand, time and time again, with many of parishioners. It is especially true when people have talked about wanting to attempt suicide. It was their faith AND the practice of that faith which provided them with hope in otherwise hopeless circumstances.

The Harvard study concluded: Religiously affiliated Americans, on average, are as actively devout as they have always been. But the number of religiously affiliated individuals is in sharp decline. As of 2014, for each American that made a specific religious affiliation, there were another 4 Americans did just the opposite, abandoning their formal religious identity.

There is no straightforward solution to our current problem, but there is a lot that can be done and everyone can play a role in helping America heal. The first step: be present. Close your computer and engage your colleague while waiting for a meeting to start. Re-define phone “FaceTime” by opting for a real shared coffee instead. Check in on the widow down the street. Recognize the sacred space of the home, by designating “tech-free” spaces. Reclaim the dinner table and engage in religious and other institutions of civic life. In short, re-cultivate the virtues of association and community. When we begin to think what difference does it make, let us recall what Jesus has done and what he continues to ask us to do. Love one another as I have loved you.