

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT CYCLE B

If I were to ask what is the largest living organism on earth, many would answer the blue whale, or the African bush elephant. But, according to Wikipedia, the answer is an aspen grove in Utah nicknamed "Pando", which means, "I spread" in Latin. "Pando" covers over 106 acres and has an estimated weight of over 6000 metric tons.

"Pando" began with just one parent tree. As the roots of that tree spread, they sprouted to become another tree, and eventually the entire grove was populated. The DNA of that grove has been tested, and the scientists discovered that every tree has an identical gene structure. The entire grove is technically one living organism connected by one root system.

We too are one living organism in a spiritual sense. We are all created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 27). We are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6). And in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17). We are connected from the very beginning by one Spirit rooted in the Holy Trinity.

Because we are all one body in Christ, everything we do affects the entire body. There is no private sin, and there is no private joy. The sin of one person affects (or infects) all of the people of God. But, the good news is that the good deeds of one person can affect all the people of God as well.

If you need proof of this, just go to the office on Monday with a scowl on your face and see how long it takes to make your co-workers grumpy. In contrast, if you enter with a smile and a good word, you will lift up all the people around you.

God has placed within each of us the desire for love; to have an intimate experience of God and His people. The Ten Commandments were intended to accomplish that end for Israel.

The obedience of Israel was to become their response to God's saving action in history. Obedience was not a condition of God's love; His saving action was already part of the history of Israel. Obedience to the Law was intended to become a new way of life that will make a loving relationship with God possible.

Any love relationship requires both an invitation and a response. If we look at our families as a sign of God's love for us, we can see the truth in that statement. If there is only an invitation to participate in family life without a response, you will have the makings of a dysfunctional family.

So I ask you, during this season of Lent, what can we do to satisfy our longing to become closer to God and His people?

The first thing we can do is to take time to meditate on our life in light of the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and the teaching of the Church. When we know and are sorry for our sin, we can celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. Our sins are forgiven by the sacrament, but there is something more we can do. We can try to repair some of the hurt our sin has caused to the community. Remember, the good we do affects the community as well.

Let me tell you a story about Jim. I met him at a Christian Experience Weekend a year ago. Jim shocked all of us when he revealed, that he was suffering from severe depression, and he was actually considering suicide that very day. We all became instant friends with Jim as we discovered what a sincere, kind and loving person he

was. Jim shared his profound gratitude for all of his newfound friends during the closing ceremony. We were all moved to tears as Jim shared his story with us.

Unfortunately we didn't do a very good job of following up with Jim after the retreat was over. He lives over an hour away for most of us, and we were trying to be cautious not to interfere with what could be a job for a medical professional.

We had another amazing CEW just a few of weeks ago, and we invited Jim to attend the closing ceremony again. We were hoping to hear a glowing report of how Jim took that wonderful experience of Christian brotherhood, and turned his life around.

When it came time for Jim to speak, he struggled to get out of his seat. He uses a cane now, and he is very unsteady on his feet. As we handed him the microphone, he lost his balance and began to fall. Several of us rushed in to catch him and we were just in time to keep him from a nasty fall.

Jim had four hand-written pages of text that he read for us. He described in vivid detail what it was like to suffer from severe depression. His words were profound and very emotional. I couldn't stop my tears as Jim described the suffering he endured last year.

He described how isolated his disease made him. He said he would go to church an hour early just so that he would not have to see anyone. He sat in the abandoned choir loft so that no one would have to talk to him. He said he was truly the least of all.

Then he said something so profound that I can't get it out of my mind. He said: This disease took away my job, this disease took away my strength, and this disease took away my mind. All I have left is Jesus. All I have left is Jesus!

We felt like we let Jim down. We thought of him all day, all night, and all week. We had to do something. We decided that each one of us would attend Mass on Sundays, pray for Jim, meditate on the scripture as it related to Jim, and write him a letter of support. We would each do this on our assigned week, so that Jim will get a letter of encouragement every week until our next retreat.

I would like to read part of the initial letter that we sent to Jim.

Your witness during the closing ceremony last Sunday was so powerful that it will have an effect on the entire CEW community for years to come. We saw in your suffering the passion of Jesus that saves us.

You demonstrated by your testimony that when one person in the community is suffering, we all suffer. We have been convicted by our lack of support for you. We all wish that you lived in our hometown, so that we could visit often, not just for your sake, but for our sake as well. You have much to offer the world by your witness. Seldom have we heard the truth spoken so powerfully by anyone, as when you said: "The only thing I have left is Jesus".

We of the CEW community would like to offer our support, again, not just for your benefit, but for our benefit as well. In the Kingdom of God, you can't give a blessing without receiving one in return. We would like to offer you the blessing of our letters that we will send to you throughout this year. Some may even have the

opportunity to speak to you face to face. You have helped us to understand that we are one in Christ, and we suffer with you. May Jesus give you peace beyond all understanding.

Chances are that you know someone like Jim. Reach out to them. They need to know that they are a very important part of the community. Let them know that their place in the community is in the front row, not out of sight and out of the way. They need to know by our actions, that like that aspen grove, we are all connected from the beginning by one Spirit rooted in the Holy Trinity. Do this and the temple of your spirit will be cleansed, and you will be ready to celebrate the Easter joy with Jesus, the one true Temple of God.

Deacon Alan Christy

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