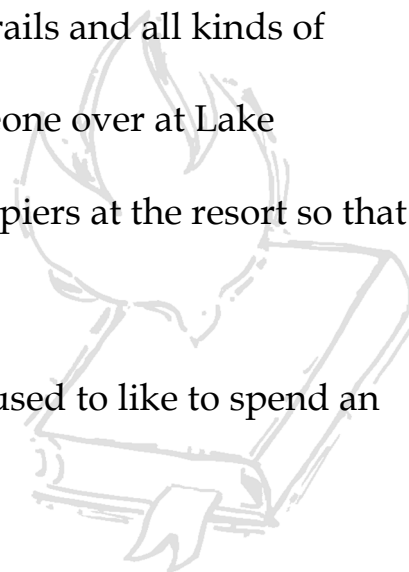


Homily
3rd Sunday OT - B
Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
January 23-24, 2021

Jon 3:1-5, 10
Ps 25:4-5, 6-7, 8-9
1 Cor 7: 29-31
Mk 1: 14-20

When I was being raised in the Sandwich, Illinois (population 5,400 with – I think now the population has increased by a thousand or so), living on a three-acre property in the middle of nowhere, my father, me and the family used to raise the sheep and the ducks and the goats and the chickens and the two dogs (Pepper and Lucky) and all the cats and the two-hundred trees that my father had planted. Periodically during the summer, my dad would take us all fishing. There was a resort right next to where we lived called “Lake Holiday,” a man-made lake, where the owners of the property used to throw in all kinds of fish for people to catch. The resort included a beach, walking trails and all kinds of nature hikes and scenery. My father knew someone over at Lake Holiday that would allow us to sit at one of the piers at the resort so that we could spend time together.

During these fishing expeditions, my father used to like to spend an



hour or two with each one of us four kids, so that we would have quality time with dad as he enjoyed doing the thing that he loved to do. That said, to be honest... I LOATHE FISHING. I do not like putting the worms on the hook. My father liked fishing for catfish, so he would put this Limburger bait on the hook, this Limburger cheese dough that absolutely smelled disgusting. Whenever we caught the catfish with this Limburger dough, the horns of the catfish would stick out and, inevitably, I would get pierced by the catfish horns. I did not like putting the worm on the hook, I would usually cast my fishing line into the trees and I was not good at catching fish like the rest of my family. When I did hook a catfish, I found them to be greasy, smelly and disgusting. Because the water was not that clean at Lake Holiday, the fish absorbed the dirty water on the lake and I got sick eating what I called "dirty fish." That said, my father loved the endeavor so I would go fishing for his sake, not mine. I just wanted to spend time with my dad.

So what vocation did I end up pursuing in my life? *God called me to be*

a fisherman. What I did realize in my youth was that my dad was trying to get us to spend time with him, to bond with him and each other, to do what my father liked to do. In this vocation as a priest which I have been called to live, I realized I am called to do the same in God's name.

There are many aspects to the priesthood that are uncomfortable to me, but more than anything, I have been called as a priest to meet people where they are walking in their faith journey to tell them that they are loved, that we care for them and to learn from them as they learn from me. I have learned that each of us are part of the body of Christ with different talents and gifts. I learned that the awesome gift I have received is to share God's grace through the sacraments, to allow God to work through me, to offer the sacraments for others.

I feel very blessed serving as a vessel of God; I feel blessed that God has asked me to offer this kind of ministry to others. On June 1st, I will be celebrating my 25th anniversary as a priest. When I was ordained, there were three of us in that ordination class; I am the only one still left standing (you can watch my ordination Mass on the YouTube "John

Jones" channel). I certainly was not the smartest of the three; I certainly did not possess their gifts. That said, God has called me to serve this way the last quarter of a century and God has called me to do this for a specific reason.

I think that one of those main goals that God has asked me to pursue is the protection of kids and the vulnerable, especially those who have been mistreated, whether they be in the womb or outside the womb. I think God has a specific vocation that he has called me to live, which will become very apparent in the weeks and months ahead.

I think that all of us have a vocation and I certainly want to support those who have pursued the journey towards the priesthood and the religious life. There are two groups or religious sisters with whom I am very much attached in my ministry that have modeled this vocation for me. One group is *Las Hermanas Josefinas (The Sisters of St. Joseph)*. The sisters who own a convent in Mexico City very much helped me in my Spanish studies; here in the states, *Las Hermanas* dedicate their lives ministering to poor families with children as part of their daycare center

operation.

The other group of religious with whom I am closely associated are the Poor Clare Sisters at the Annunciation Monastery in Minooka, IL, who help guide me during my difficult times, helping me get through my daily grind as a priest and allowed me to live in their house in quiet reflection. This year while I teach over at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, the sisters allowed me to live in the guest house where is first celebrated Mass for them in 1996. The sisters have asked me to learn the Mass in the Extraordinary Form (in Latin!), offering this particular form of grace to them as they dedicate their lives praying for poor souls like us.

It dawned on me that in my twenty-five years as a priest, neither *Las Hermanas Josefinas* nor *The Poor Clares* have garnered one vocation in the Joliet diocese for all the good work they have done. The Sisters of St. Joseph have sacrificed to serve the neediest and the poor of Joliet; the Poor Clares live a cloistered life, removed from the world to dedicate their lives to praying for the salvation of souls. I look at their example of

faith and realize how really important it is for us to promote priesthood and religious life for the sake of offering the Lord's grace to others.

I certainly know how difficult this ministry is (you have *no idea* how difficult this ministry has been for me!); I know that I have gone through my struggles in this path of faith; I also know that the priesthood and religious life is not easy. That said, I also say that to be a parent is an awesome responsibility when moms and dads have to sacrifice their lives and livelihoods to raise children. Whatever the vocation, to offer God's grace in whatever way that God is calling us to do it, especially through the sacraments, is so important because that grace connects us to God and guides us towards the other side of our life on earth.

Some years ago at my last parish, I researched the history of this diocese and came to realize that the ratio today between the priest and parishioner is just as low now as it was back in the 1850s; the number of priests reached its apex in the 1950s and 60s and has decreased ever since. For those priests and religious who remain, I have experienced so many of them craving to share the love of God with others. It is my

responsibility here at the border towns to share that grace when others in the vocation may not want to serve. I have found eastern Kankakee county to serve as a blessing for me. I find this a blessing because here at the border towns, there are so many good folks that have done great things and have taught me a great deal about the faith.

Your response to this ministry has been such a wonderful blessing as well. Even during the pandemic, we noticed that, in the last couple of years, we have actually made more money at the parishes I serve than we have spent; we have kept the ship afloat. This wonderful output of faith really is because of *you*... and it has been a blessing to me that all of you have been so supportive of each other. I have come to realize how blessed I am to be here to serve you and you should want in God's name to serve each other, to pray for each other, to love each other, to serve each other. That you do very well with your time, talents and financial resources

The stories that we have in today's scriptures are very apropos. In my particular ministry, I have felt like Jonah during most of my priesthood.

I feel nervous and I feel scared concerning what God has asked me to do. I feel like what God has asked me to do has been a daunting task. In the ministry of serving and protecting the most vulnerable (especially children), I have experienced way too many highs and lows. There have been times when I felt like I jumped a ship, only to be swallowed by a big fish when I have tried to escape what God has asked me to do. I also know that God has given me a wonderful gift to offer this grace to others.

When I reach the most difficult moments of this vocation, I keep reminding myself of the Catholic patron of parish priests, St. John Vianney, who experienced many struggles back in the 19th Century. I recall how he struggled mightily in his own work of God, that he often tried to escape because what laid in front of him was too much. I also recalled how God called him back to his parish in Ars, France, for the salvation of the souls of others... and his as well. Because of St. John Vianney's determination in the faith, so many souls were saved and so many lives were healed.

I can only hope and pray that I have the strength of the prophet Jonah, the strength of St. John Vianney. I pray I have enough strength to continue fighting for the cause of the protection of children and vulnerable in a disposable society that often casts off the weak and vulnerable in order to satisfy their own hedonistic desires.

This is the second week in a row that we have focused on the calling of the disciples in our gospel readings. Last week, was that according to the gospel of John (Jn 1: 35-42); this week, we focus on the same calling from the perspective of the gospel of Mark (Mk 1: 14-20). We learn from these gospel stories that Peter, Andrew, James and John were by no means perfect in their respective ministries. Each of these apostles carried shortcomings in their lives. Especially in the gospel of Mark, the author specifically focuses on these apostles who did not understand who Jesus was and who acted as if they never did it. In the gospel of Mark, I have learned that those from the outside reading the story had a better understanding of the gospel message than those on the inside such as Peter, Andrew, James and John; sometimes the apostles were

depicted like they were completely clueless to the ministry our Lord offered. At times, I feel that way myself. I also know if I put my faith in God, that there are great things that could happen. All I have to do is allow God to lead me in ministry rather than me trying to lead God.

Last week. I had an encounter with a woman who was so worried about the elections and so worried about the direction in which our country was going that I had to remind her and myself how, in the scriptures, how the people of the supposed faith wanted to follow a human leader rather than a divine one. I realized then, and now, that we think a human leader is going to get us to the other side of life but ultimately realize that time and time again, when we put our faith in a human leader, we are going to fail because the human leader has human fallacies and human shortcomings. I told this woman (and myself as well) that if we focus on God, if we focus on that grace and undeserved gift that God gives us any way, that God loves us and that love is enough to get us past the few years we live on earth so we can get past this earth and into heaven. I told this woman that if we focus on God

more than the human being then we secret to getting to the other side of life – all we have to do is love God and love our neighbor. I cannot control the ways of the world, but I can allow God to lead me to heaven.

This is the ministry that God has asked me to live. This is the blessed life that God wishes to share with others and certainly wishes to share with me. I know that my life has been a difficult one and it is not going to get much easier with what I am going to do. Nevertheless, I ask you to keep praying for me, to keep praying for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Let us realize that there is a blessing in what we are called to do by God, a blessing in this ministry. Let us continue to support this ministry by inviting others, encouraging others, to consider the priesthood and religious life for the salvation of souls, starting with our own. The Sacramental and religious vocation is a blessed ministry; so many are being called – let us pray and hope that people respond to that call. Let us continue to encourage and love and offer this vocation, no matter what our talents and gifts, to the people that we meet. This is our prayer.