3rd Sunday in Easter (A)
4/26/20 - Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish (Berkeley)
[Theme: In a competitive world, we’re called to be patient and love and to allow Jesus to guide us.]

We live in a complex world of competition. Maybe it’s the nature of having a free-market economy where competition is the means for creativity, industry, and productivity. It has made the US, the richest and most powerful nation in the world. But through its dark side, it can make us forgetful of the two fundamental laws of the universe, to love our God and to love our neighbor.

You don’t get to Cal without having a competitive streak given over 87,000 students applied in 2019 and only 15,000 students were accepted, just 17%. Also, one doesn’t get a job in the prestigious Bay Area without some degree of competition.

In our current pandemic situation, we are experiencing the effects of competition over cooperation in the lack of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, the lack of flour and yeast in the stores. Clearly diarrhea has not hit everyone in this country and not all these hoarders have taken up opening a bakery.

We also see the competitive ethos in people putting others down, wanting to shame them at every opportunity, to show how much better one is over others. In politics, negative campaign ads, especially through independent PACS, have become the norm. With a national election this year and several swing states that could go either way, we can expect the negative ads to be extra nasty.

One thing I didn’t like about my life in computer science was when I went to CS conferences, there were always a few folks during the Q&A who would ask mean questions to punch holes in a presenter’s talk just to show how much smarter they are over the presenter.

And in our competitive world, the ethos and tendency are to play the critic, to come with what is wrong, rather than to be grateful and see what is good and right. Excessive competition leads to a perspective to see the cup as half-empty needing protection rather than half-full able to be shared.

As we have been sheltered in place over a month and patience runs thin, make sure the critic voice doesn’t over take the gratitude voice, especially with those you live with.
To help us gain a healthy and realistic perspective, it is always useful to look closely at our Lord and how Jesus behaves, he who embodies what it means to be fully human.

The line that stuck out for me in our Gospel, was after the two disciples complained to a stranger of how he could be so blind and not realize all the happenings in Jerusalem, especially the major disappointment Jesus was, allowing himself to be tortured and crucified. He, who they recognized as a mighty prophet in word and deed in the midst of Roman occupation and oppression, was a letdown.

Jesus responds, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!”

What comes to my mind is Mr. T from the 80’s TV show, “The A-Team”. Mr. T plays B.A. Baracus, a strong man sergeant, associated with saying “I pity the fool” or “you crazy fool” to shame and insult others. The disciples do look like fools being blind, yet they consider Jesus the blind one.

Except we see Jesus is the opposite of Mr. T. Mr. T’s character wants to shame and look down on others. In a competitive environment, it is tempting to seize the moment to power grab and shame another person, to point out their faults. Or in fits of disappointment or anger, it’s easy to let out the meanness and cruelty.

In contrast, Jesus doesn’t seize the opportunity to shame or insult the two disciples for their lack of faith, nor for their abandoning the other disciples and Jesus’ mission.

Jesus easily could have. After all, He had forewarned the disciples what was going to happen. Nothing should have been a surprise for them. But still in the craziness of it all and his failing to live up to their expectations, we find these two disciples escaping Jerusalem.

But rather than shame these two disciples, Jesus takes the time to go through Scriptures with them, to show that everything happened as predicted by the prophets. It was all according to God’s plan, even though it makes no earthly sense. Given this is a 7-mile walk, we’re talking about a lot of time Jesus is spending with them to explain things. In this, Jesus demonstrates tremendous patience and love for these disciples, who he easily could have just scolded for failing to believe.

His incredible patience can make our impatience seem so petty and reckless.

Jesus does another amazing thing for these two disciples. He demonstrates his presence in two novel ways. The women and the apostles had just experienced Jesus in his resurrected body.
But the primary way these two disciples on the road to Emmaus experience Jesus is in Scripture and in the breaking of the bread.

And those are the primary ways, we are invited to experience Jesus until His return at the end of time. Our liturgy emphasizes both of these – Word and Sacrament. The first half of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word, where we are invited to experience our Lord in Sacred Scripture. And then the second half of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Eucharist, where we are invited experience our Lord in the breaking of the bread, in remembrance of Him.

If we’re open to our Lord’s presence, our hearts too will be burning within. We can tap into that, when we experience the joy of the Gospel, the sense of being loved by our God.

That heart burning sensation is a similar experience to being with a beloved friend or spouse. It’s a similar experience to being in in the midst of powerful peace and beauty experience in nature, music, friendships, or family.

It’s all about entering into the experience of the Mass. Now this is hard to do if we’re too busy being critical about this or that, or too occupied with worries, or too distracted by our desires for entertainment or amusement. So it’s about learning how to slow down and allowing our Lord’s presence to guide us, just as He guided the two disciples.

And like those disciples, our experience of the Lord should make us want to rush out and share the Good News with others.

Now a danger of watching Mass online, we’re already stuck in a sedentary position. It has taken away the procession, the sense of being on a journey. You may want to consider, before Mass, taking a walk around the block, to provide that normal the procession to reset yourself and prepare for worship.

And after Mass, get up, and walk around the block again. Do a procession that allows our burning hearts to go out and share the Good News. Because of social distancing, we may not be able to share the joy with others that easily. Definitely share it with those you live with. But at least we can be like St. Francis and preach to Brother Sun, Sister Moon, the wind, the birds and the trees our Easter joy, our Risen Lord.

In our crazy competitive world, in a world where it’s easy to be like Mr. T and want to shame others, we’re invited to follow the way of Jesus, a way of patience and love, and to allow our Lord go guide us such that our hearts burn with joy and peace, guiding us in the breaking open of the Word and in the breaking of the Bread.