

Jubilees, as I well know this year, are always about thanksgiving. You sisters before us no doubt give thanks to God for the call which he placed before you these many years ago, and the ongoing graces he showered upon you to continue to live that call for 50 and 60 years. And **we** give thanks to God *with* you and *for* you as you have been witnesses to his ever-present love in your lives and ours.

Your many years of faithful ministry in education, health care, music ministry and pastoral care have touched thousands of lives with the spirit of Francis and Clare. As I mentioned in my homily on the Sunday when you honored my 50 years of priestly service, “Where would the Church be without the selfless, dedicated, competent service of religious women like yourselves?” Thank you.

And now to the beautiful and powerful scriptures you chose for this celebration. This is the fourth consecutive year in which I have preached at the Sylvania Franciscan Jubilee liturgy. And I have to admit that I was somewhat relieved that you did not choose the OT passage from Jeremiah 29: “I know well the plans I have in mind for you... a future full of hope...” I know that the inspiration and meaning of Sacred Scripture is infinite, but my small mind is not, and coming up with a new wrinkle on Jeremiah 29 for a fourth year may have been beyond my limited abilities!

So, instead of Jeremiah, we heard from Isaiah today—also about being chosen, chosen to be a servant, imbued with the spirit. God, “who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spreads out the earth with its crops, who gives breath to its people and spirit to those who walk on it”—that most high omnipotent God—called **you**. And for what purpose? To be instruments of justice, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners out of

confinement, to bring light to those in darkness. A tall order. But not **too** tall for one reason: He formed you and grasped you by the hand. You have never been in this alone. And the times when you may have thought you were, I'll wager you fell flat on your face! Our hand is always in his.

This ministry of justice was always what Jesus was about as he proclaimed the Kingdom of God breaking into our world. We hear this passage from Isaiah every year on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the beginning of his public ministry. This is also the passage he chose to read in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he was about to leave the narrow confines of his home of 30 years.

Jesus literally opened the eyes of a number of blind people in his travels through Galilee and Judea, but he opened the *spiritual* eyes of the whole world. He physically brought Peter out of prison, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, but he brought the *whole world* out of the infinitely worse prison of sin and selfishness, by blocking our road to hell and opening our road to heaven.

As I am sure you sisters know well, God always surprises us by doing more, not less, than we think. St. Francis once said to Brother Juniper, one of his monks, "Brother, which do you think is the readier: God to give us grace or we to receive it?" It is the vocation of each of us to make our hearts more and more ready to receive that grace so freely offered.

Then we heard a beautiful brief passage from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians. He had never been to Colossae, but he heard of the growth of the faith there from one of his co-workers, Epaphras. So Paul writes to congratulate them and encourage them to grow more deeply in the faith. He tells them that from the moment he first heard about them, he has been

praying for them. And what is in his prayer for them? That they be “filled with the knowledge of God’s will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” He prays that they would “live in a manner worthy of the Lord... bearing fruit with every good work... that they would be strengthened with his power for endurance, patience and joy... giving thanks to the Father who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light.” Paul’s words are eloquent, direct and touching, and they need no amplification from me.

But there is one thing I wish to point out. His words were not addressed to a person, an individual, but to the whole community. I think we need that perspective of community and prayer to avoid being trapped by disappointments. You sisters have lived as members of a community for 50 and 60 years. And that life is not without its challenges at times, I’m sure. But that “spiritual wisdom and understanding [necessary] to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,” of which Paul writes, is not something we acquire or retain very well on our own. We need each other. I hope that you will continue to be thankful for one another and eager to express that thanks, even in the difficult times.

And finally we hear Jesus himself in the Gospel. The disciples had just gotten quite a shock. A man comes up to Jesus, asking him what he needed to do to be perfect, beyond keeping the commandments. Jesus then tells him to give up all his possessions and follow him. The man’s face fell and he went away sad because he just couldn’t make that step. That incident gave Jesus the opportunity to talk about wealth and how it diminishes a person—the eye of the needle and all that...

None of the disciples were rich, even Matthew had given his wealth away, and they all had left home to follow Jesus, but it did shock them into asking, “Then, who CAN be saved?” Jesus assures them that God can make anything possible. Only much

later would they come to know what we celebrate at each Mass: His own total sacrifice of self on the cross won for us God's victory over our sin and death.

But Peter just had to ask. "Well, what about US, Lord?" He just had to go a step further and remind Jesus of the sacrifice they all had made to follow him. Jesus' response is a consoling invitation for all of us today, particularly I think, for our jubilarians. The more we have let go to follow him, the more we will receive back, many times over. He is never outdone in generosity. And just so that we are not under any illusions, he also reminds us that if we *really* follow him—and don't let possessions and all that come with them control us—we will be living a very counter-cultural life. Rejection and persecution is the way the world treats those who try to follow Jesus. It is to be expected. But he will take care of us. It is that simple: He does not forget his own.

The rich young man, James and John, Peter and the rest of the apostles really wanted to have it all. But the great revealing discovery of life is that the only way to really "have it all" is to completely surrender to the only one who can offer us the fullness of life here and now, and forever. *Suscipe*, as St. Ignatius says.

Dear sisters, you have been making that surrender all your lives, 50 and 60 of them as vowed members of this Sylvania Franciscan community. Thank you! May our good and gracious God continue to bless you with health and the continuing desire to live the call which he has placed in your lives.