

Homily for Ash Wednesday 2014  
St. Joseph's Neier/SFBRHS  
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March 5, 2014

Central Idea: Lent calls us to receive a new heart, to do it now, and to do it with joy.

*"Hi, my name is Adolfo"*

So begins one of the most remarkable letters I have ever been privileged to read, a letter which would have never been written if it wasn't for an incredibly sad tragedy.

Two years ago on Valentine's Day, one of the young men of my parish was involved in a serious car crash. He was taken to St. Louis, but he eventually died of his injuries. His parents made the remarkable decision to donate his organs for transplant. And since that time, they have been deeply involved in telling his story and getting others to sign up to be organ donors. They knew that there were several people who got a second chance because of their selflessness and foresight. They were privileged to be part of the Rose Bowl Parade this year as their son and brother's likeness graced a float.

But nothing could quite prepare them for what happened in January, when they, out of the blue, received *the* letter. Let me read part of it to you. I will tell you I have edited it for continuity.

*Hi, my name is Adolfo, I am 13 years old and I am very grateful for having the heart transplant. I would like to apologize for not writing any sooner, and I hope I did not upset any of you. It is something I will never stop thanking you for. Even though I live in Texas, I am not a cowboy; we have a few cows and a horse. I like to draw, it's my talent! I take Art classes at school; I have a lot of friends at school. I guess you could say the heart transplant made me popular; almost everybody knows me at school for that. I was born with Marfans syndrome. It affects my height, vision and heart. A specialist said that my aorta had swollen up to the point where they needed to operate. They had to put me to sleep for two weeks because my heart was so weak that it could not help me breathe. When I got out of the hospital I was always in a bad mood because of the medicines I took. I would have horrible leg cramps, bad blood circulation, swollen feet and couldn't eat anything because I would throw up.*

Needless to say Adolfo needed a new heart. And so it was two years ago, as one family was grieving, another family got not just good news, but astonishing news. Zack's heart was quickly airlifted down to Texas. The doctors had one hour to insert the new heart and get it pumping. The clock was ticking. The race to save Adolfo was on. Can you imagine Adolfo's mother Mayra hearing these words: *The heart is here, we opened his chest, the heart is completely attached, the heart is pumping, pumping with a lot of*

*strength, pumping at the rhythm we want it do.* It took them a scant 45 minutes. 45 minutes and a young man has a second lease on life.

“Hi, my name is Adolfo and I am grateful for the heart transplant.”

I think we have all seen as we have followed the journey of Mrs. Poepsel and her transplant, the incredible difference it can make: literally a difference of life or death. We live in absolutely amazing times. But this homily is not just about getting you all to sign up to be organ donors, although that would be nice. Instead it is getting you to think about what getting a new heart would be all about, the difference it can make in your life.

Today, on Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent, a season where God gives us a new heart, a new life. In essence, you are all Adolfo, seeking a new heart so that you can move and live and operate. Seeking a new heart so that you are not angry anymore. Seeking a new heart, so that you may live.

There are three things about this story I would like us to reflect upon today. First, someone had to die, so that he could live. I know it sounds cruel, but it truly is the story of life. We as Christians know that to be Jesus, the Christ, by whose death our stony, hateful hearts are transplanted with new vibrant ones. But during Lent we are also called to die to ourselves, through prayer and self-denial, so that something new may arise in us, something new may have life. This Lent, let your old, stubborn, sinful, useless self pass on. Let the new man or the new woman be born.

Second, now is the time. Zach’s death poignantly reminds us that one never knows how much time, we really have. I did not read the whole letter to you, but there is a disturbing, breathless immediacy in it. The chain of events happened very quickly and abruptly. The rapidity of a transplant is obviously because the organ cannot live very long on its own. St Paul reminds us today that, in no uncertain terms, now is the time, now is the day of salvation. Having gone through my own brother’s death this fall, taught me not to take moments, not to take opportunities, not to take time for granted. The ashes we wear are stark, even downright severe reminders of our mortality and then need to change and to change NOW!

Finally, we need to see in the story of Zack and Adolfo, that in our faith, sadness always gives way to hope and life. Lent is not a sad and painful time, it is a time of spring, it is a time of life, it is a time of joy. Don’t you dare walk around this school (parish) looking glum and complaining about how you miss Sun-Drop or Mountain Dew or Borgia cookies or Facebook or texting or candy! In my classes yesterday, the Rhomberg twins independently asked me what I was giving up for Lent. I didn’t tell them because that would have been prideful and would have missed the point of the season. I will tell them now that I am committed to be more joyful. But I will also say this:

Every year I give the whole Borgia community a penance for Lent. This year when everyone seems crabbiest and angrier and more short tempered than ever, let's try, all of us (faculty and students) to be kinder to one another. That doesn't mean we allow you all to get away with sloth or bad behavior, but we promise to deal with it in a healthier way.

And if you need any inspiration for this then let me read the concluding words of the letter written by Adolfo's mother;

*We know we could never pay you for giving us the gift of life. Now my son is alive because of your son's heart, I cannot imagine how hard it is for you not to have Zack with you anymore, that he does not smile, that he doesn't play with his brother and sister. I am very sorry. I want your son to live and that you not be sad anymore. I know that is not possible right now. But I believe in the promise that God has for our loved ones that have died. I believe in the resurrection and when the day comes you will get to see, hug, kiss and be with him forever. I believe that promise too, and I know that when that day comes we also will become friends.*

Quite a vision there, isn't it?

And not a bad way to start this amazing time.

Happy Lent!