

Homily for the Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)

St. Joseph's Neier/25th Class Reunion

September 20-21, 2014

Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: The mercy of God goes beyond what we imagine, beyond what we find fair.

*What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?
Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?
Are you envious because I am generous?*

She called him, “mon premier enfant.” My first child.

Hold on to your hats this is going to be a wild ride.

The crime was horrific, so horrific I am not even going to give you all the gory details. The date is March 17, 1887 and the bodies of two women, Marie Regnault, a prominent Parisian woman, and her servant, Annette Gremeret are found brutally murdered in an apartment in Paris. The motive was robbery. Regnault was a, how can I put this mildly, courtesan, wealthy enough to have a maid and some fairly expensive jewelry. The thief stole the jewelry and in the process horribly murdered the two women. But it was happened to the third victim of this crime which made it so, so, so very ghastly and appalling. The maid's 12 year old daughter, Marie was found, in her bed, viciously killed in a way too horrible for words.

What kind of monster, what kind of fiend, what kind of beast would kill a child in such a way?

The answer came relatively quickly. A man by the name of Henri Pranzini was found trying to sell the jewelry (and at a bargain price I might add) within a week of the killing spree. Though Pranzini feigned innocence, it would not take Sherlock Holmes to prove otherwise. He left a trail of guilt as wide as the Champs-Elysee. By July he was found guilty of murder. He was to be executed by the guillotine in August.

Mon premier enfant. My first child, she called him.

As horrible as this crime was, and as prominent as it was in the press, Both in France as well as in America, Pranzini would have been relegated to the dust bin of history if it not for another little girl, all of 14 years old, a little girl who made a remarkable connection between herself, pure, chaste, untainted and holy and Pranzini, a worthless excuse for a human being if there ever was one. Her name was Theresa Martin and she wrote in her journal about how she had hoped to *save* Pranzini.

She wrote: *I heard talk of a great criminal just condemned to death for some horrible crimes; everything pointed to the fact that he would die impenitent.... I felt in the depths of my heart certain that our desires would be granted, but to obtain courage to pray for sinners I told God I was sure He would pardon the poor, unfortunate Pranzini; that I'd believe this even if he went to his death without any signs of repentance or without having gone to confession. I was absolutely confident in the mercy of Jesus. But I was begging Him for a "sign" of repentance only for my own simple consolation.*

Such was the heart of Theresa Martin, now recognized as St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower.

This is not about capital punishment (though the story has been used to both support and reject that practice). This is not about a young woman enthralled by the bad boys. Not even close. **It is instead a reflection upon the mercy and the grace of God, a grace all of us need, a grace none of us deserves.** That is the message of that infuriating parable of the workers in the vineyard we read in our gospel this week. It is about a God who is startlingly generous in his mercy, almost to the point of unfairness, definitely to the point of irritation.

How do you feel about Pranzini? Would you have prayed for his unrepentant soul? Would you have made the connection between yourself and this beast? You see, St. Therese realized that the great and small, the seemingly innocent and obviously guilty, a pure little girl and a grotesque murderer, all, ALL, need God's grace, all, ALL, are in need of his abundant mercies. I will admit, it doesn't feel right. I will admit, it seems too easy. I will admit, I don't like being connected to "those kind of people." But St. Therese is right, isn't she?

We are all beneficiaries of the grace of God. We all, though we enter the vineyard at different times, we all share in the marvelous mystery of the forgiveness, compassion and the kindness of loving and gracious God. As annoying as that sometimes seems.

And now it is time, as Paul Harvey would say, for the rest of the story.

Even though her father forbade her to look at the newspapers, Therese couldn't resist. She wrote: *In spite of Papa's prohibition that we read no papers, I didn't think I was disobeying when reading passages pertaining to Pranzini. The day after the execution I found the newspaper "La Croix." I opened it quickly and what did I see? Ah! my tears betrayed my emotion and I was obliged to hide. Pranzini had not gone to confession. He had mounted the scaffold and was preparing to place his head in the formidable opening, when suddenly, seized by an inspiration, he turned, took hold of the crucifix the priest was holding out to him and kissed the sacred wounds three times! Then his soul went to receive the merciful sentence of Him who declares that in heaven there will be more joy*

over one sinner who does penance than over ninety-nine just who have no need of repentance.

Therese was convinced her prayers had helped save the forsaken Pranzini from damnation. He became for her *mon premier enfant*, my first child, and the experience strengthened her conviction to become a Carmelite nun, and intercede for others in desperate need of God's love.

St. Therese of Lisieux, pray for us.