January 24, 2016
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – “Let today be a new beginning in your spiritual life”
Deacon Dave Snyder

Reading 1  Nehemiah 8:2-4A, 5-6, 8-10
Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which consisted of men, women, and those children old enough to understand. Standing at one end of the open place that was before the Water Gate, he read out of the book from daybreak till midday, in the presence of the men, the women, and those children old enough to understand; and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. He opened the scroll so that all the people might see it — for he was standing higher up than any of the people —; and, as he opened it, all the people rose. Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people, their hands raised high, answered, “Amen, amen!” Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves before the LORD, their faces to the ground. Ezra read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read. Then Nehemiah, that is, His Excellency, and Ezra the priest-scribe and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all the people: “Today is holy to the LORD your God. Do not be sad, and do not weep” — for all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. He said further: “Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared; for today is holy to our LORD. Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!”

Reading 2  1 Cor 12:12-14, 27
Brothers and sisters: As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many. You are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news of him spread throughout the whole region. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all. He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

HOMILY
I admit it – maybe I don’t like to admit it, but I do – I can be wrong … sometimes. And, I think my family can back that up. Many years ago, long before I even thought about the diaconate, when our children were in their teens, I was in some kind of mood, maybe I had just gotten involved with
something. I commented to our children that we hear too much about Social Justice concerns and not nearly enough about other things that I thought were important – there were already many programs for the poor, the homeless, the supposed outcasts of society. Besides, I argued, the government probably spends too much on those programs anyway.

Yeah … I admit it … I was wrong, very wrong. I never imagined at the time, that today I would be talking about, much less preaching about, that very same topic … but with a very positive outlook on it. So, what changed? I guess I let God be God in my life. And, in some ways, it might be described as what Matthew Kelly refers to in his Rediscovering Jesus book, in the very first chapter, on New Beginnings. We all need new beginnings in our lives, don’t we. If you work often enough around a computer, you realize that every once in a while, your computer just stares back at you and you need to perform what is affectionately called a reboot, an RG&E reset. Well, maybe we all need to reboot our lives every once in a while – with a New Beginning. The Bills seem to be trying to reboot each year, so why not us.

So, how about today, today we think about rebooting our lives, reboot with a new beginning. Why today? Because, as our 1st reading says to us, “Today is holy to the LORD your God. Do not be sad, and do not weep.” The Jewish people needed a reboot, they had just come back to their home from exile, many years in captivity. They found the books of the Law, agreed that they should be living according to their covenant with God, and said that today they will have that new beginning! They will try to live their lives as they should, starting today.

Why today? Because we are several weeks into our Jubilee Year of Mercy, a year that Pope Francis announced last April in a formal decree, where he effectively said that during this Year of Mercy we need to live Jesus’ message more consciously and more intensely. Not could, not should, not maybe, but need. We need to live out Jesus’ message of mercy … starting today.

Why today? Because it’s the start of a new calendar year, a year when we make resolutions and promises on how we are going to improve our exercise program, our eating habits, our sleeping patterns, our relationships with those we love, our need to get more R&R. But, it’s also an opportunity … a great spiritual opportunity, to improve on our need to live Jesus’ message in our lives and how we deal with everyone around us, not just those we love.

Why today? In our Gospel passage that we just heard, Luke has Jesus returning from 40 days in the desert, invigorated by the Holy Spirit, teaching in the synagogues. He was praised by all, according to the reading, but people are wondering who is He, what is He about. Jesus reads from Isaiah about bringing glad tidings to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming a year acceptable to the Lord. He then says, “Today, this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” In effect, today, it begins … today is a new beginning in Jesus’ message to the Jewish people … and to the world. A new beginning, when all will come to hear who He is, and what He is.

Why today? Because it’s the start of a new semester of the school year, and it gives students a chance to reboot. Certainly it matters what happened earlier for them, but this new semester could mean new courses, maybe new teachers, and surely new things to learn. Effectively, it’s a new
beginning for all involved: the students, the teachers and administrators, and probably parents and others also.

So, I’m going to challenge each of you here today, to look at this Year of Mercy, which began last December 8th, and continues until November 20th of this year, as a year-long opportunity of learning ... and of doing. Of learning about Jesus, of learning about our faith, of learning about ... mercy ... and also doing – living Jesus’ message more consciously and more intensely. Think back to last November, around Thanksgiving, for example, and grade yourself on those 3 aspects of your life as a Christian, as a child of God back then – Jesus, faith, mercy. Three subject matters, three grades for learning and 3 grades for doing – from 1 to 10 in each subject – consider a 5 to be average, maybe a C, and 10 would be a solid A+. Again, borrowing some thoughts from Matthew Kelly’s book, if you had to explain who Jesus is to someone who knew nothing about Him, what would you say about Him? And how would others, who know you very well, grade you? Your honest answer would tell you what grade you should get. Give yourself learning and doing grades for those three subjects, and write those down when you get home. Next, consider this Year of Mercy to be your marking period, your semester – your challenge is to improve on each of those grades by November. Let today be a new beginning in your spiritual life as a child of God. Any children and teens out there, the roles are reversed, here is your chance to encourage your parents, as well as yourselves, to improve.

One great part of this whole challenge is that St. Louis is going all out to help you. Consider all of the Year of Mercy events that have already happened here, and all yet to come. We had the Walk of Mercy in the gym, the Candlelight procession in the village, Frank Runyeon’s presentation on the Gospel of Luke, and other great and relevant events. Consider all of the Bible Study discussions, Fruit of the Vine talks, and other group events. All of these are geared to help you learn about Jesus, our faith, and mercy.

But, what about the doing part of the challenge – remember, learning and doing? St. Louis parishioners are no strangers to helping others, whether in support of Fr. Rick and Haiti, Saint’s Place, food cupboards, soup kitchens and other organizations, parish liturgical and social ministries, and faith formation. Over two hundred parishioners attended the parish volunteer celebration on Friday evening, and I’m certain there are many more of you volunteers who did not attend. Even so, how would each of us grade ourselves in those three categories of learning and three of doing? Maybe we could look at opportunities a little differently.

You are probably aware of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy: two types of merciful activities that we can pursue as part of our doing. To help you in this year-long challenge I’ve been talking about, we have put together a tag board of the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, with inputs from Fr. Bob, members of the Consistent Life Ethic Team and others. This board is located at the rear of the church between the old confessional booths and the main doorway. On this board, for example, you can find the Corporal Work of Mercy, Feed the Hungry, and listed on the tags under it are activities such as Help out at a soup kitchen, or Give to the Pittsford Food Pantry on a regular basis, or even Donate a pizza certificate to a Fire Department or Ambulance Corp for the volunteers. There are over two hundred tags on the board, and we’re asking each of you to look them over and take one, take a few – by taking them, it becomes a reminder to get it done. There are two tags that request you
bring items here – baby clothes for Birthright, and food for the Pittsford Food Pantry on the collection weekends – otherwise, notice that we are not collecting anything here, it’s an action that involves a direct contact between you and those who need the help, as Christ did, to more effectively live out His message of mercy. The CLE Team will be replenishing the tags over the next several weeks, and we are hoping that you look over the tags on a regular basis for other opportunities. So, as you exit church, please stop by the board – and let today be a new beginning for you in your spiritual life.

Not too long ago, someone mentioned to me, and I’m paraphrasing a bit, that we’re always hearing about feeding the hungry and other works, that we know what we’re supposed to do, we need to hear more about other topics. In some ways, that reminded me of my comment to my children years ago. But, maybe we just need to take another look at it, maybe think outside of the obvious. Let’s stretch the concept of “corporal work” just a little – look on the board for the not-so-obvious activities. Example – look for Give someone a call who is homebound for some reason, under Comfort the Imprisoned. And, under Bury the Dead, look for “Bury” a grievance or grudge you have against someone and forgive them.

To wrap-up, I do encourage you to take advantage of the Tag Board and other activities sponsored and promoted by St. Louis during this great Jubilee Year of Mercy. These are great opportunities to live out Jesus’ message of mercy, starting today. Let today be a new beginning for you in your spiritual life.

Now, I could be wrong on all of this – but I’m sure I’m not – today, I’m not wrong.