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Homily – Our Task is to Help Prevent Suicide
October 28, 2012 – 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Video / Audio Homily for All Archdiocesan Parishes
Readings: Jer 31:7-9; Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6; Heb 5:1-6; Mk 10:46-52

People often find beggars annoying. Some will cross the street to avoid them. A man who was raised during the depression told of how the hobos, the knights of the road, would constantly arrive at their kitchen door asking for a handout. His mom would prepare sandwiches, a piece of fruit and a cup of coffee. They wondered why their back door seemed to attract more beggars than the rest of the neighborhood. One day they discovered that there was a mark on the curb in front of their house that indicated that this family would give something. The little boy asked his mother if he should erase the markings. His mom told him to leave them alone. It was a lesson that the boy never forgot.

Today's Gospel is about a Beggar named, Bartimaeus, which **means** Tim's son. Bartimaeus is a blind beggar who has placed himself on the side of the road where all the pilgrims will pass on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. Everyone over 12 years of age who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was expected to go to Jerusalem for the feast.

I cannot hear this Gospel without remembering a young man from South America by the name of Segundo who arrived at National Airport in Washington and was referred to the Travelers' Aid Desk. Segundo did not speak English. He knew no one in Washington, he had no money and he was blind. Someone who worked for an airline had gotten him an airplane ticket and a visitor's visa. Travelers' Aid sent him to me at the Centro Católico Hispano. As politely as I could, I asked "What possessed you to come to Washington without knowing anyone, without a plan, with nothing?" He said: "Padre in my country there are no seeing eye dogs, no schools for the blind, and not much medical attention. Blind people in my town spend their whole life sitting on the steps of the Church begging from the people going to Mass. I said: "Segundo, welcome to Washington. Welcome to the Spanish Catholic Center."

In today's Gospel, Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, is there hoping to get a handout from the Church goers. The Gospels often describe for us two categories of people; the crowd and the community. The crowd is a collection of individuals who are quite content to put their own personal interest first, and to mind their own business. This group is often portrayed as pushing people away from the Lord, like the crowd in today's Gospel who keep telling the beggar to shut up. The community are those who share Jesus' mission and are calling people to draw near, to be closer to the Lord, to be a part of their family of faith. The community are the ones in the Gospel who say: "Take courage, get up, Jesus is calling you." We want to form not a crowd, but a community; a family of faith, a community that cares for the blind beggar, the helpless child, the sick and the dying.

St. Francis loved beggars and became a beggar himself and wanted us his friars to be beggars because being a beggar reveals a lot about our human condition, our dependence upon God, and our interdependence among ourselves. At periods of our life, we are completely dependent on others for our basic needs; at the beginning and at the end of life. Somewhere in between, we get to be caregivers.

The Elizabethan poet, John Donne, wrote that no man is an island, that we are diminished by each death because we are part of humanity. The poet bids us: "Inquire not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

We cannot ignore the impending legalization of Physician-Assisted-Suicide as if it did not affect us. It would bring spiritual death, a cheapening of human life, and a corrupting of the medical profession. Physician-Assisted-Suicide means making the pharmacists, doctors, nurses, family members, friends and society itself, accomplices in a suicide. Our task is to help prevent suicide and provide the very best palliative and hospice care for our terminally ill loved ones. You will hear many emotional arguments in favor of Assisted-Suicide. We all get

emotional when we talk about the death of those whom we love the most. Laws must not be born out of emotions. Laws need to reflect the moral law, the common good and the protection of the most vulnerable.

There are many citizens of this State who do not share our faith and for whom the clear Biblical teaching is not a convincing argument. To them, we make an appeal to reason: that this is bad legislation because it puts vulnerable people at risk and it promotes suicide.

Some of the perilous flaws of this legislation that need careful reflection even by those persons who favor physician assisted suicide are:

- Doctors agree that terminal diagnoses of 6 months or less are often wrong. Many people with a terminal diagnosis live for years.
- Patients requesting suicide do not need to be examined by a psychiatrist before receiving a lethal prescription, despite that many of them are suffering from the depression. This prescription is for about 100 capsules of Seconal. Of course, people can't ingest 100 capsules all at once. So they pour the contents into juice or applesauce to consume it. Poisoning is never a dignified way to die, especially with no doctor present.
- There is no requirement that the patient notify family members. Compassionate care at the end of life should involve the loving support of family members.
- We should be supporting improved hospice and palliative care statewide, not legalized suicide.

It is also important that some people in Massachusetts oppose Question 2 because they believe that a ballot initiative process is not a good way to deal with a complex, ethical issue involving life and death. The legislature exists to be able to review proposals, hold public hearings and build consensus on complicated issues.

We are asking our Catholic parishioners to help in this very challenging time. We feel confident that if the voters have a chance to hear about the flaws in this proposed legislation, they will vote No on Question 2. It all hinges on our ability to get the message out. Please take copies of the hand out cards, and distribute them to your family, friends and neighbors at the events you attend over the next week. You might ask people if they have heard about Question 2, and tell them you would like to read the card with some of the reasons that medical organizations, disability groups, and other community leaders are voting no. There are also sample texts on SuicideIsAlwaysATragedy.org that you can use to e-mail folks, post on Facebook, Twitter or Google-Plus. I would not be asking this of you if it were not so critical. I would hope that each of us would try to reach at least 10 people with this message.

This is not partisan politics, it is simply exercising our right to contribute to the exchange of ideas that the Constitution of the United States guarantees. The Churches perform an important service by weighing in on moral and ethical issues. Many people objected to Archbishop Romero advocating for the poor and objected to Reverend Martin Luther King's work on behalf of social justice. They both gave their lives to make their countries better places where human dignity was respected.

We are all called to work for a more just society where the weak and the vulnerable are nurtured and protected. Our faith demands that we not be guilty bystanders. That's why I am asking you to join me and partner with so many medical and disability groups to stop assisted suicide by Voting No on Question 2 on Election Day.

The beggar Bartimaeus was ignored by the maddening crowd. They tried to silence him, but Bartimaeus refused to be intimidated. It took courage to cry out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." It was interpreted as a political statement by some, no doubt. It was rather a cry to escape from the world of darkness. Jesus heard Bartimaeus' cry and called him over and asked what he wanted. Bartimaeus said: "Lord that I might see." Jesus who spent his ministry trying to heal blindnesses of minds and hearts says to the beggar: "Go your way, your faith has saved you." The Gospel said, he immediately received his sight and followed Jesus on the way. What a beautiful ending to this Gospel. Bartimaeus did not disappear when he received what he asked for. With faith and gratitude he became Jesus' disciple and followed the Lord to Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified ten days later – and three days after that, rose from the dead.

Let us beg the Lord to cure all our societal blindnesses and help us to follow Jesus with the faith and gratitude of Bartimaeus. Following Jesus is never easy, but it always leads to deeper love and joy. Just ask the beggar.