

- Most of you know that I recently returned from a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, the village in Bosnia-Herzegovina known not only for the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but for all the miraculous phenomena that occur there.
- When I first visited Medjugorje in 1992 as a brand-new Catholic, the chain of my rosary turned gold. On my second pilgrimage in 1993 I witnessed the miracle of the sun spinning and throwing off vivid colors. Though miraculous, both are common occurrences there.
- Even though I was initially attracted to Medjugorje – at least in part – by the stories of miraculous phenomena like these, these phenomena are not what take me back there now.
- For we learn from the life of Jesus that, while miracles may catch someone's attention, they seldom succeed in producing true and lasting conversion.
- Yet for the 3 years of His public ministry, Jesus produced miracle after miracle, and still He was abandoned by His closest followers in the end.
- Even in our Gospel today, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus from the netherworld to his living brothers to warn them to repent, but Abraham says that if they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't repent even if someone is raised from the dead.
- Miracles don't make us Christ's disciples. We still have to choose Christ.
- While miraculous events and signs may initially draw us to God and open our eyes to His power, we still must choose Him and seek a life of virtue. We still have to do the hard work of living as Christ would have us live.
- As for Medjugorje, whatever your personal beliefs about it may be, I can tell you that I've returned there in recent years because of the profound conversions and heartfelt confessions that so often occur there.
- Over my more than 20 years of priesthood, I've heard countless stories of people being healed, converted, or coming back to the Faith, or finding the grace to overcome a particular struggle in their life while on pilgrimage to Medjugorje.
- In this way, a pilgrimage to Medjugorje acts as a sort of "leg up" in the spiritual life. It's not a panacea or cure-all for our spiritual woes. It's more a place where, because of the peace that pervades it, one is able to get one's spiritual priorities straight and thereby choose God.
- Our readings today speak to us about getting our spiritual priorities in order so that we might prepare ourselves for Heaven. This is so very important, because the spirit of the world lies to us and convinces us that personal happiness is found in taking care of one's own needs.
- The world extols the vices of greed, selfishness, and seeking comfort over virtue. The world beckons us to take care of our own needs first without regard for the needs of others.
- That's precisely what we find today in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which speaks of how the rich man dined sumptuously, while poor Lazarus would have been happy to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table.
- Outside of the lessons about the immortality of the soul, and the rewards and punishments we will face, this parable teaches us about the inherent dignity of every human person, regardless of his financial or social standing.
- At the heart of this parable is an exhortation for us to cultivate the universal Christian virtue of charity! We are to give to others in need because God has given to us all that we have. We are to show mercy to others because God has shown mercy to us.

- Living a life of charity is the living heart of being a disciple of Jesus. This is why the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are so important to us as Catholics. Indeed, Matthew 25 makes it quite clear that doing good to others is essential for our salvation.
- This isn't because our good works save us; we are saved by God's grace alone. Rather, our practice of charity purifies us and makes us more like Christ. Choosing to do good to others is a way we show we're Christ's disciples.
- What's interesting about today's Gospel is that the gravest sin of the rich man isn't his greed. His gravest sin is that he looks down upon Lazarus with disdain. He considers Lazarus a nuisance. The rich man's attitude is an affront to Lazarus' inherent human dignity.
- Even in the afterlife, the rich man believes Lazarus should serve him, and so he pleads with Father Abraham to employ Lazarus in either cooling his tongue or warning his brothers.
- In the spiritual torpor and complacency that's resulted from his living of a rich and sumptuous life, the rich man thinks he's better than Lazarus – and that's his real downfall.
- That's the danger of having so many of this world's good things so easily at our disposal: we get spoiled and mix up our priorities! If we aren't careful, we can begin to believe that we deserve only the best that life has to offer, and we can lose our capacity to suffer well.
- Even worse, we can begin to believe that we're entitled to the good things of this world, and begin to look down on those who don't have what we have. This is what happens to the rich man in the parable. His priorities in life are completely inverted.
- Hopefully, none of us are so hard of heart and so blind to the needs of others that we act like the rich man in the parable. But it is always good to examine how we think about and treat others – whether we're guilty of rash judgment or omissions of charity.
- Meditating upon this Gospel, it's also good for us to ask ourselves if we are spiritually complacent because we are materially or financially blessed. Have we lost our sense of true dependence on God because we have enough of this world's goods to take care of ourselves?
- As we consider all this, it's also vital for us to take the advice that St. Paul gives us today, to “pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness.” To “compete well for the Faith” and thereby “lay hold of eternal life.”
- As I've told you before, Heaven is not something anyone accidentally falls into. To go to Heaven when we die, we have to live now in a manner that shows to God that we desire salvation – especially with regard to how we treat those around us.
- We must be zealous, and never allow complacency and sloth to rule us. We must have our priorities straight. We must choose to be Christ's disciples.
- We also have to be rooted and grounded in charity, never judging the hearts or intentions of our fellow man, never looking down upon anyone – but believing, in humility, that everyone around us is actually better, holier, and more pleasing to God than we are.
- Brother and sisters, blessed as we are in this parish: financially, materially, and even spiritually, it would be easy for any of us to be complacent in our faith and judgmental of others. It would be easy for us to take for granted all that we've been given.
- May this never be the case. Indeed, may we always be grateful for our blessings, and may be ever willing to do the hard work Christian discipleship demands.
- And like Lazarus, may we be ever aware of our poverty and our wounds, look to Christ for healing and nourishment, and humbly entrust ourselves to His eternal mercy. The salvation of our souls is the only miracle we really need.