

FEBRUARY 21, 2026 FATHER VIJAI AMIRTHARAJ

Some years ago, a man collapsed on a busy corner in downtown Brooklyn. And within minutes, an ambulance rushed him to the nearest general hospital. And from time to time, the man would regain his consciousness and would keep on calling for his son.

And in his wallet, the attending nurse found an old letter which indicated that he had a son who was a marine stationed in North Carolina. So, she called and asked him to come over immediately. And as soon as the marine arrived, the nurse took him to the man's bedside and whispered, "Your son is here. Your son is here."

The old man opened his eyes, and even though he could not recognize the face, he noticed the marine's uniform. So, reaching out compassionately, the young man took the old man's hand and held it lovingly. And sometime later, the nurse urged him to go out and have something to eat and drink. But the man declined, and only asked for a chair, so that he could sit by the old man's bedside and keep holding his hand.

And sometime before dawn, the patient passed away, and stepping up to the marine, the nurse extended her sympathy. "Nurse," the marine stammered, "who is this man?" The nurse couldn't believe her eyes. "Why," she replied hesitantly, "I thought he was your father." "Quite honestly, nurse, my father died some years ago. I have never seen this man before in my life."

"Then why did you not say something earlier?" asked the nurse. "I would have," answered the marine, "but I could see that he was too sick to realize that I wasn't his son. I could also see that he was slipping fast and that he needed the comfort of his son. And so, I decided to stay."

Now, sisters and brothers, throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus repeatedly in the company of tax collectors and sinners, those who were pushed to the margins, those who were judged to be unworthy, or those with who were written off by society and religion alike. And Jesus does not approach these persons with suspicion or superiority, but rather with compassion.

In today's Gospel, Jesus extends his hand of compassion to one such sinner, Levi. In fact, he extends his hand of compassion to many more, as he breaks bread with Levi and his friends. As a tax collector, Levi probably was quite well off, but he was ill emotionally and spiritually. Jesus, the divine physician, knew this, and so, he extends his hand of mercy and acceptance.

And when the Pharisees and scribes object, Jesus reminds them that he is indeed the divine physician sent by God to heal, to bring wholeness to people's lives.

Now, sisters and brothers, today's Gospel challenges us, you and me, to examine our own hearts, especially during this Lent. Whom do we instinctively judge or avoid? Where do we draw lines that Jesus constantly is crossing?

Now, to follow Christ is to allow our hearts to be stretched, to move beyond comfort, to move beyond reputation, and to move beyond our fear, and to mirror the love, mercy, and compassion of Jesus.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah offers us some practical guidelines, which could be good Lenten practices that will help us to follow the way of Jesus more closely. The prophet says, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall shine in the darkness."

Now, you and I know that these sound so good and so noble, but when it comes to practicing it, living it in our everyday life, we all fall short. But the wonderful thing is that our Lord, who extended his hand of mercy and compassion to Levi and to so many others, extends the same hand of mercy and compassion towards us during this Lenten season, to invite us back to follow him more closely and more faithfully.

And so, let us open our hearts, as we begin this season of Lent, so that we will receive the grace of God, to grow more into the likeness of Christ, our Lord. Amen.