

23 Sunday B

September 9, 2018

St. Patrick

From the letter of James, God's Word, which we heard this Sunday—

“Listen, my beloved sisters and brothers. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?”

A hundred-forty years ago this month marked a devastating, tragic time within the history of our St. Patrick Parish. In 1878, Memphis was a city with 50,000 residents. An outbreak of yellow fever scourged the city. The number of those who died from this horrific disease—its origins then a mystery—was 5,150 Memphians, at least 2,000 of which were Catholics (1). Within a week of the plague's start, half of the residents fled the city and went elsewhere.

One person came back. It was the founding pastor of our parish, Monsignor Martin Riordan. At the outbreak of the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis, Monsignor Riordan was away from the city, recuperating from an earlier onslaught of the fever.

Still weakened, immediately Monsignor Riordan returned to Memphis when he heard of the fever's outbreak. No doubt on the road, he saw thousands heading in the opposite direction. Our first pastor returned in order to minister to his parishioners and others sick within the city. In the month of September, an average of 200 Memphians died every day (2). In the midst of serving the sick and dying, within two weeks of his return Monsignor Riordan died from the yellow fever scourge. In fact, five priests from this parish—St. Patrick's—died of the yellow fever epidemic in the two years of 1878-79. Half of the city's doctors also died, serving their patients.

Another shocking catastrophe hit our nation seventeen years ago this Tuesday with the 9/11 attacks in New York City and beyond. I recently read what a retired firefighter said to his priest son after the 9/11 attacks. “Those firefighters who died in New York,” the father said, “they died running into the building. When there's a fire, and lives are at stake, somebody has to run into the building” (3).

St. Patrick's: Our first pastor, Monsignor Riordan, and four other priests, together with many others who offered service to the gravely sick—well, “lives were at stake,” and they ran back into a burning building, this city on fire with an unknown, deadly fever.

They chose to identify with, and become themselves, **“poor in the world.”** They then became **“heirs of the kingdom that God promised to those who love him.”**

In his obituary in The Memphis Appeal the day after his death on September 17, 1878, this anecdote was noted. In his illness, a family sent three nurses so that he might choose one of them to remain with him and care for him. Monsignor Riordan was quoted saying this: “My friends, I am greatly obliged to you for coming, but there are hundreds of poor people dying without even a drink of water, and I would prefer to have you attend to them” (4).

Yes, he and others chose to run back into the burning building, this city on fire with an unknown, deadly fever. What a legacy for this parish, as we craft our future! Friends: it's our time—and we're called to choose whether we'll be among those, with lives at stake, who run into the burning building.

We're in zip code 38126, the poorest zip code in the poorest city within our nation. Do we, as a parish, stay committed to it, or in effect, “bail out”?

Within the suffering and mess of our church universal, and in this diocese, do I—we—choose to go elsewhere, or to be those who run into the burning building? (5)

A hundred-forty years ago, this month, our first pastor, Martin Riordan, made the choice to **“be among the poor in the world.”** And many at St. Patrick's since then have served this community and surrounding area with the same spirit. May we, as a parish, build upon such a treasured legacy and be numbered as **“heirs of the kingdom that God promised to those who love him!”**

- (1) Rev. D.A. Quinn (who became the second pastor of St. Patrick), Heroes and Heroines of Memphis. I am grateful to our parish's volunteer archivist, Theresa Gifford, and her colleague, parishioner Jeanine Blackwell, for their invaluable help with this history about the 1878 yellow fever epidemic.
- (2) See "August 13, 1878: First victim of Memphis yellow-fever epidemic dies" @ <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-victim-of-memphis-yellow-fever-epidemic-dies>.
- (3) Quoted from Matt Malone, S.J., "Why do we stay in the church?" in America (September 17, 2018).
- (4) See The Memphis Appeal, September 20, 1878.
- (5) See Matt Malone, *Ibid*.

General Intercessions

September 9, 2018

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

You come to save us: free us, your church, from hearts that are frightened; we pray to you, O Lord—

You teach the Gospel: bless all our catechists here at St. Patrick's as they share your word with hungry hearts; we pray to you, O Lord—

You hear the cry of the poor: empower our St. Patrick Parish to build upon our rich legacy in being one with the poor and in their service; we pray to you, O Lord—

You secure justice for the oppressed: uphold all peacemakers, and give safety to all fire and police personnel, as well as all in the military; we pray to you, O Lord—

You heal our infirmities: pour your tender mercy upon those who suffer illness in mind or body; we pray to you, O Lord—

You are the firstborn of the dead: show the grace of resurrection to all who have died, especially Monsignor Martin Riordan and all from this parish and city who died in the yellow fever epidemics; we pray to you, O Lord—

