

Homily

3rd Sunday of Lent – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski

March 07-08, 2026

Ex 17: 3-7

Ps 95: 1-2, 6-7, 8-9

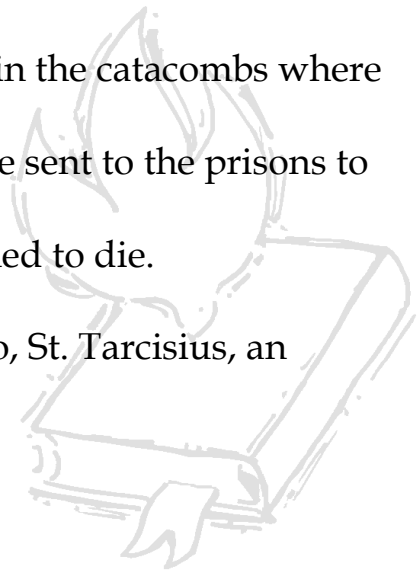
Rm 5: 1-2, 5-8

Jn 4: 5-42



Tarcisius was a 12-year-old acolyte during one of the fierce Roman persecutions of the 3rd Century, probably during that of the emperor Valyrian. Each day from a secret meeting place in the catacombs where Christians gathered for Mass, a deacon would be sent to the prisons to carry the Eucharist to those Christians condemned to die.

At one point, there was no deacon to send. So, St. Tarcisius, an



acolyte, was sent carrying the holy mysteries to those in prison. On the way, Tarcisius was stopped by boys his own age who were not Christians but knew him as a playmate and the lover of games.

On that occasion, Tarcisius was asked to join their games, but this time he refused, and the crowd of boys noticed that he was carrying something. Somehow, Tarcisius was also recognized as a Christian and a small gang of boys anxious to view the Christian mysteries became a mob and turned upon Tarcisius with fury.

During this attack, Tarcisius went down under the blows, and it is believed that a fellow Christian drove off the mob and rescued the young acolyte. The mangled body of Tarcisius was carried back to the catacombs, but the boy died on the way from his injuries.

Tarcisius was buried in the cemetery of St. Callistus, and his relics are claimed by the church of San Silvestro in Capite. In the 4th Century, Pope St. Damascus drafted a poem about this boy martyr of the Eucharist and said that like another St. Stephen, Tarcisius suffered a violent death at the hands of a mob rather than give up the sacred body to quote raging dogs. His story became well known when Cardinal

Wiseman made it a part of his novel Fabiola in which the story of the young acolyte is dramatized in a very moving account given of his martyrdom and death.

Par meritum, quicumque legis, cognosce duorum,
quis Damasus rector titulos post praemia reddit.
Judaicus populus Stephanum meliora monentem
perculerat saxis, tulerat qui ex hoste tropaeum,
martyrium primus rapuit levita fidelis.
Tarsicium sanctum Christi sacramenta gerentem
cum male sana manus premeret vulgare profanis,
ipse animam potius voluit dimittere caesus
prodere quam canibus rabidis caelestia membra.

(Damasi Epigrammata, Maximilian Ihm, 1895, n. 14)

Tarcisius, one of the patron saints of altar boys, has always been an example of youthful courage and devotion, and his story was one that was told again and again to urge others to like heroism and suffering for their faith. In the passion of Pope Stephen (written in the 6th Century), Tarcisius is said to be an acolyte of the pope himself and if so, explains the great veneration in which he was held and the reason he was chosen for such a difficult mission.

You who read, whoever you are, recognize the equal merit of the two to whom Damascus the bishop had dedicated this inscription after their rewards. The Jewish people stoned Stephen when he was instructing them on a better course. He who carried off the trophy from the enemy, the faithful deacon, first laid hold of martyrdom. When a raving gang was pressing holy Tarsus to reveal the uninitiated, the sacrament of Christ that he was carrying, he wished rather to release his spirit struck down than to betray the heavenly limbs to mad dogs.

This was written by Pope Damascus early in our Church's history about a very young boy of age 12 or 13, who serves as a patron for altar servers and acolytes in the faith. We do not hear a lot about Tarcisius because his feast day happens to fall on August 15th and the feast of the Assumption of our Blessed Mother. I often reflect on this disposition of holy, innocent children, the "Holy Innocents," the disposition of the Samaritans (specifically the Samaritan women), individuals who often are pushed aside, marginalized, castigated because they have of a lower rank than what we would consider our so-called "mainstream" society.

Of these kinds of people, the scriptures often depict those of this humble disposition as the opposite of what we portray. In the 1st Century, slaves were considered of no more value than property. In the

First Century, women were considered of value just above slaves.

Samaritans were considered of the lowest class of Jews who would be disparaged and pushed aside by those of the so-called upper class.

This attitude happened in the First Century and this attitude happens today. Like times of the past (perhaps in different ways), As a society, especially for those whose lifestyles or beliefs differ from “ours” (whatever that means to whichever group), for some reason this gives those in our society the permission to marginalize, to shut down, to mistreat peoples for all kinds of different reasons. When others live differently than us, we create libelous stories against other groups (the Church calls this “calumny”) that disrespect others and shut down others, which is completely against the gospel message and is a warning by our Lord. For those who exalt themselves. Our Lord warns us about this type of attitude (against what God might call a “be”-attitude). Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Mt 23: 12).

As I reflected on the life of this humble altar boy, St. Tarcisius,. I reflected about the importance of what he did with that Eucharist. In a

similar fashion, I reminded myself about the story of St. Philip Neri, when he was celebrating Mass and he saw a person leaving services early immediately after receiving communion. At that moment, St. Philip instructed one of his acolytes, his altar servers, to carry a lit candle and accompany that person outside of the church. St. Philip knew that inside the person who consumed that consecrated host, that person served as a tabernacle of God. Inside of them was the presence of Christ.

Every single one of us who receives communion serves as a tabernacle because inside of each of us at that moment holds the presence of the Real Presence of God, body, blood, soul and divinity.

Once we realize what is inside of us after consuming the Blessed Sacrament, what is upon us, our disposition is supposed to change; our lives are supposed to elevate itself. After receiving communion, we are supposed to be something holier than before because God is with us physically. This is the story we learn from the Samaritan woman at the well. We learn that in weeks three, four, and five of this cycle of Lenten Readings from the Gospel of John, these readings specifically are

addressed to catechumens and candidates who wish to receive the sacraments for the first time at the Easter Vigil.

During these three weeks of Lent, our catechumens and candidates prepare their dispositions to receive God in the most intimate way. In these stories of the woman at the well, the man born blind and the raising of Lazarus, these three stories during the Season of Lent prepare those entering the Church that God can take the impossible and make everything possible. We teach those entering the Church that a twelve-year old like Tarcisius knew the sacred gift he possessed in his hand, his hand serving as a sacred tabernacle that was willing to carry this body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ to the people of faith.

Here at St. Anne's, during the Communion Rite at Mass, one of our parishioners named Cookie Schroeder takes six of these consecrated hosts out to the community; she brings this Real Presence of God to six members of our community who cannot attend Mass but wish to receive God's presence in their lives. As I was celebrating the funeral of Honorable Patrick Burns (a judge who served in our area for twenty-seven years and died at the age of 93) a parishioner named Gwen

Polletta would take the Blessed Sacrament and his wife each week, symbolically telling him that even in his frail condition, Judge Burns was not alone.

We have so many individuals who take this Precious Body of Christ and bring it to the homebound, to those who are in need. We are blessed to do it because if we understand that sacred gift that exists in every tabernacle of every consecrated Church throughout the world, if we understand what is inside of us when we receive communion, then we do not leave Church – we do not persecute others. *We remain in Church – we love others as God loves us.*

Take the Samaritan woman from today's gospel. The story talks about a woman who was considered the lowest class of Jews among their kinsfolk, who was considered little more than property of the men from the First Century. In this story, Jesus elevated this woman; Jesus lifted her to an equal status as a sister. In the story of Philemon from the New Testament, St. Paul tells Philemon to treat a slave named Onesimus and elevate Onesimus to that of an equal. When we receive the Eucharist, we are to do the same for each other, that we are not

supposed to shut people down or tear people down, but we are supposed to build people up.

For those who tear down, for those who are intent on destroying others, God has a response for them and that will be on the last day. For those who lift others up, for those who build, especially most in need of God's mercy, God is going to take care of them because they are acting like God. *That* is what the Eucharist is supposed to mean for us; *that* is the message we need to teach our catechumens and our candidates as they prepare for what they are going to receive on the Easter weekend – that every single person is sacred and important. Every single person has a story and if we are doing this right, every single person with a proper disposition becomes a tabernacle that holds this precious gift of God in their lives and in their bodies for that period when they receive the Holy Eucharist.

For St. Tarcisius, he did not take the Eucharist for granted. We sometimes forget about what this Eucharist is, this real presence is and *we* take it for granted. St. Tarcisius knew that lesson well and was willing to give up his life for the sake of the cause. St. Philip Neri knew

this lesson well, which is why he asked an acolyte to carry this precious body with a candle to carry it with this person who left communion early. The servers who assist us at Mass may take what they do for granted, even though they have an *awesome* responsibility of holding that candle by the body of Christ, by the word of God, by carrying us into the church and out of the church with these sacred images that remind us that God is with us.

For this reason, we need to give thanks to our altar servers, our lectors, our ushers who are supposed to be ministers of hospitality to welcome people in. That is why here at St. Anne's in the back of the church we display symbols of faith from those cured by the relic of St. Anne, those who believed and whose faith preceded the physical miracle set before them.

As we remember St. Tarcisius, the young altar server whom we forget each year because of solemnity the Assumption of our Blessed Mother that displaces this feast day, we would like to conclude this homily with a special prayer dedicated to this 12-year-old boy whom most in society have forgotten, the boy whose faith often surpasses our

own. We offer a prayer in honor of a young altar server who was given this awesome responsibility of showing us what we need to do to elevate the presence of Christ in our life so that we can do the same for the people of this generation. So we pray...

Oh God, you have graciously called me to serve you upon your altar. Grant me the graces that I need to serve you faithfully and wholeheartedly. Grant that while serving you, we may follow the example of St. Tarcisius, who died protecting the Eucharist and walk the same path that led him to heaven. St. Tarcisius, pray for us and for all altar servers. Amen.

St. Tarcisius, pray for us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is our prayer.