I want to point out something that is incredibly obvious in today’s Gospel lesson. The scene is this: Jesus and some of the disciples are in the house of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum. People hear about Jesus being there and begin to show up. Many are sick or possessed with demons and Jesus heals many of them. At some point it appears that everyone went to bed and, in the morning, Jesus sneaks out to a deserted place. The disciples eventually find him and tell him that everyone is searching for him. Jesus responds by saying, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” So here is my very obvious observation and that is that if Jesus is in the neighboring towns he will not be in Capernaum. In practicality what this means is that there will be sick people in Capernaum who will not be healed. For you see in Jesus becoming incarnate and dwelling among us he willingly took on limitations to his divinity and one of those is the ability to only be one place at one time.

And outside of stating the obvious this does bring up something which may make us uncomfortable and that is the fact that while Jesus was on this earth, he did not heal everybody. There were still sick people in Capernaum who would not be cured. However, by the same token if Jesus had stayed in Capernaum and cured all who were there, he would not have been able to cure the people in the neighboring towns. However you decide to slice it you end up with a scenario where someone who is sick is not going to get cured. And this limitation on one’s power to affect a particular situation is a fact of life not just for Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry but for all of us. And what all of this points out is that while we are on this earth sometimes good things will happen to us and sometimes, they won’t. Decisions that we make may benefit someone but at the same time might hurt someone else. Our time spent on this earth is uneven. I am sure we have all known wonderful people who have encountered tragedies in their lives and most likely we have even encountered some ourselves. And the question for us is how do we resolve the fact that everything in our lives does not go perfectly with the fact that we worship a good and loving God?

Amy and I were having a discussion the other day about how we often have a transactional relationship with God. What we meant by this was we had a relationship where we came to God with a list of problems and then it is God’s duty to fix whatever problems we have presented him with. If God comes through and takes care of our problems then he was a good God and we will continue to worship him. However, if God does not take care of our wish list then we were free to be mad at God and move on and find a new god. But is that right? Is God only worthwhile when we get what we want? I think the answer is no, but I also think we need to be fair in how we address the question. When we say God does not give us what we want it can sound like we want something selfish – a nicer car or a bigger house. But there are often times what we want is good and noble – the recovery of a sick child or the restoration of a broken relationship. So the question we need to think about in all of this is how do we deal with the fact that sometimes Jesus moves onto another town? What I mean by this is not everyone gets healed, not all good requests are granted. In today’s story there are those who showed up that morning with an ailment only to find that Jesus was not there and so their chance to be healed has dissipated. In our lives we have probably all encountered a time where we prayed for someone and they did not recover. On August 31st of last year I received a text from Julie Peay telling me that Fr. Peay had gone into the hospital and that he needed our prayers. During my daily broadcast I asked all of you to pray for him, which I am sure you did and at around 8:00 PM that same day Fr. Peay died. And so what do we conclude? Do we say that God does not answer prayers or that God only answers some prayers or if we want a more Pentecostal explanation that all of us did not pray correctly and so God did not hear us? How do we reconcile the idea that God tells us to pray and then sometimes those prayers go unanswered?

I do not have a perfectly satisfactory answer. Sure we can console ourselves by saying that the person we prayed for who died is in a better place or that we do not see things in the way that God sees them, but I am not sure if that makes everything better, at least in the short term. And I am not sure that God wants us to pretend that everything is okay when something is obviously wrong. I mean Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus; he didn’t say that God wanted another angel. The best thing I can say in terms of how we should think about the proper way of dealing with tragedy and the seemingly unanswered prayers that may accompany them is that we might need to examine what it is that we think about prayer in general. If our definition of prayer is strictly transaction, like those who were looking for Jesus today, we are probably going to find prayer less than satisfactory. That is if we look at prayer in the framework of we ask and God responds then at some point we are going to receive a response that is not what we want. I am sure that those who were left in Simon and Andrew’s hometown may have had a different view of Jesus than those who had been healed the previous day. However, if we expand our view of prayer and how we interact with God we still might not always get what we want but we will draw closer to God; if we move prayer to being something of a continuing conversation with God about all things. C.S. Lewis put it this way, “I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”

In my mind the whole point of church, the whole point of prayer and any interaction with God is holiness. In other words, if we approach God in the same way we approach our car mechanic then we are missing the point of our time spent on this terrestrial ball. Our time should be spent growing closer to God and loving God so that this love permeates us. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." Our prayers should be about growing in love towards that which does not fade but for the things which endure forever. Now this does not mean that we should not be sad when something tragic happens. But rather it means that our faith should not be built on what God can do for us in a given moment. And while there are theological explanations for why bad things happen and why prayers go unanswered the important thing is to never stop praying. If you read through the Psalms you will see that there are prayers of joy, prayers of petition, but there are also a lot of questioning prayers asking God how long will this go on. We do not always know why Jesus moves on to the next town but we should never stop our conversation with him so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.