



Birthdays

December 13..... Caryl Moenster, Brynn Stanley

December 15..... Shawn Conlon, Aiden Crowe, Roy Tesmer, Troy Tesmer,
Oy Tesmer (Roy & Troy's imaginary triplet)

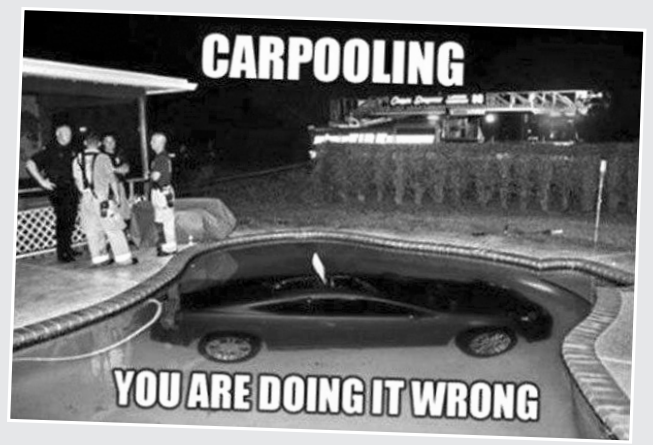
December 16..... Austin Huff

December 17..... Charles Elking

NEWS AROUND THE PARISH

- The St. Mary School Christmas Program is on Wednesday, December 14th at 7:00 p.m. Principal Darlene Smith will begin the program with a slide show and brief talk about the Holy Land. The entire program should last about 1 hour.
- **For Highland County Kids**, organized through the Prosecutors office. Money for the children that are in need. Money buys Christmas presents and any leftover will be used throughout the year on an as needed basis. Sometimes clothing and such are needed for children in an emergency situation. Sorry, St. Mary was not able to have a Giving Tree this year.





FR. MIKE'S SERMON FOR THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

During last week's parish-wide Anointing of the Sick, a parishioner said something to me so spiritually profound I feel compelled to preach on it. Right after blessing her with the Holy Oil. She said, "Father, I appreciate this sacrament so much. We will all leave here better than when we walked in." What is the special thing that makes us better? We call it "grace." Grace is Jesus loving you when you don't deserve it. So many of us Catholics get it backward. We think, "I must first be good to make God love me." This is called "conditioned love" which means I am accepted and loved only when I earn it. Grace is just the opposite. God already loves me, no strings attached, total unconditional love, and that makes me good.

Jesus has been healing me with His Grace of a spiritual sickness that has afflicted me for years. I have this anxiety that I have to always be on top of my game, always have the best sermons, always say the best Mass, always have the right answers, always please others, always be the best Pastor, and always be the best priest. And if I am not performing the best, then God will not like me. Do you see how crazy that is? That is a goal I cannot reach. Nobody is always the best at what they do. I expect something of myself that even God does not expect of me. My greatest fear is making a mistake as Pastor or preaching a boring, mediocre sermon. Fear of God not liking me drives me to constantly excel, but it creates anxiety that drains me emotionally.

But I praise God that He touches me with His Grace in some way every day. Jesus daily gives me some little sign that He loves me and I don't have to excel to receive it. I don't have to constantly prove myself. We call that "standing in Grace" (Romans 5:8). Standing in Grace means Jesus loves me so much that I can stand up to my fears, stand up to my anxiety, stand up to my worries, stand up to my faults, stand up to my sins and His Grace will keep me standing in the face of those things that try to knock me down. The Gospel today reveals how "standing in grace" works. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." (Matthew 11:4-5) The "good news" is God's Grace of unconditional love that removes anything that keeps you from living your life to the fullest. Once you believe Jesus loves you that much, then your anxieties, worries and fears will no longer control you.

Jesus gave me a sign of His Love on Monday as I was writing this sermon. I feel anxiety with every sermon I write. Same old fear tape that plays in my mind. What if it's not that good? What if I fail to touch someone's life? What if it's not interesting? What if I see someone yawning because they're bored. Blah, blah, blah. In the midst of writing this sermon, I got a phone call. It's from my friend Josh. He is going to be a Catholic. I have been working with him for 4 years to get him to join us. Josh asked me what I was doing. I said, "I'm writing my sermon." He replied, "Your sermons helped me decide to be a Catholic." I responded with my usual self-doubt, "Really. How so?" He said, "You make me feel the love. Every time I come to Church, I just feel the love!" I felt so happy after he said this. That's exactly what I want to do at every Mass. Then I felt Jesus telling me, "Mike, I want you to feel the love, too."

So on this day called "Joyful Sunday" you can leave this church better than when you walked in. Stand in Grace. Feel the Love. Now I know what St. Paul meant when he wrote in Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"