

Homily Thursday 2nd Week of Lent; Gospel John 5: 19-29

One of the challenges of this season of Lent is that it encourages self-introspection, an inward journey, searching for the answer to questions like: What do I really believe? Who was or is this Jesus? Who am I? How strong is my faith? My faith in God, in the Christ Jesus, in love? And further, questions like Does my life reflect who I say that I am? Do my actions affirm the words I say? If we choose to take this inward journey, it can be a difficult time. It requires honesty. It requires full self-disclosure. For me it means a prayerful encounter with God. There are no secrets in that interaction. No false pretenses. No half truths. I can hide nothing. God is among other things truth, and God knows the truth. All I can do is bare my soul. It is already wide open in the face of Truth anyway. And then, if we discover that we are somehow missing the mark, we have the opportunity to change something about our lives, to “turn around” and move in another direction, perhaps to become more honest, more loving, more Christ-like, more like our true selves in God. Imagine if that were to happen!

The reading we heard this evening is the first of several of Jesus’ discourses in the Gospel of John. It follows a scene where Jesus has healed a sick man—a lame man—on the sabbath, an unlawful thing to do according to Jewish law. The author of John says the Jews who witness the healing then start persecuting Jesus, saying first that he has broken the law by healing on the sabbath, and further that Jesus has committed blasphemy because he called God his own father, thereby making himself equal to God. The discourse we just heard is Jesus’ defense of his actions. The authors of John’s gospel make what they see as a definitive case that Jesus is the Son of God, and further that whoever hears his words and believes in him will be resurrected into eternal life. They will pass from death to life, a new life realized both here in the present—what we call realized eschatology—and in the future. Jesus will bring the dead back to life. In the mind of the author there is no doubt about who Jesus is, no doubt about his relationship to God, no doubt about what will happen to us if we

choose to believe, or to not believe. Follow the Way of Jesus. Pretty simple isn't it? No, I don't think it's that simple. It's not simple at all, and perhaps that's why our inward journey in Lent—our deep dive into what we really believe, into who we really are—can be such a challenge. It's one thing to give intellectual assent to a theological perspective about Jesus like the ones we read so often in John's highly theological gospel. It's quite another to accept and then follow the practical implications of the Way of Jesus that we see in the synoptic gospels.

I have found that during my own journey in Lent I keep going back to two of Jesus' most well known teachings in Matthew's gospel. The first is about separating the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25, where Jesus says "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." On my inward journey of Lent I keep asking myself, "So, how well are you doing with that one Bob?" And in my encounter with God what I come up with is "God, allow me to be a sheep at least once in a while, and never let me forget that most of my life I have been a goat."

The second of Jesus' teachings I keep going back to is even more challenging. It's in Matthew 5, where Jesus tells us to love our enemies: He says "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good..." How can I do that?, I am thinking. My prayer in response to this teaching is this: "God I have to be honest with you. I am not sure how to do this. I am not sure I even want to do it." Jesus knows that this is a high bar for us. He points out that this commandment is impossible with ordinary human motivation. After all, how can we be, as Jesus says, "perfect, as the Heavenly

Father is perfect?" I don't have the answer for how we love this way, for how we love one another—even our enemies—with love like God's perfect love. Martin Luther King Jr. once said this about how we respond to—how we love—our enemies: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." It is a hard thing to do, but it seems the only way to bring about real transformation, a real change of heart. Perhaps it is in knowing that we too, like Jesus, are born with a divine nature—a spark of God within us, our "true selves" in God—that will allow us to act and to love in ways beyond what we could otherwise do.

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