

Sundays 2-6 Cycle B

2nd Sunday B (John 1:35-42)

Many people think of Jesus in terms of his unshakeable faith in God, his heavenly Father, and that certainly was a distinguishing characteristic. But with that, and often overlooked, is another remarkable trait, his wonderful faith in people. Jesus chose as his closest friends and followers some men and women that probably no other leader would have chosen. None of them had impressive credentials. Some of them had questionable reputations. Few of them had proven qualities of leadership, and many of them had character flaws that a discerning eye couldn't possibly overlook. Still Jesus chose them as the beginning nucleus of his work. Why did he do such a thing? Why did he choose such unlikely people?

Today's Gospel gives us a classic example of Jesus' incredible faith in people. Jesus and Simon Peter met for the first time. When Jesus saw this rugged fisherman, he sized him up for a few moments and then said: "You are Simon, son of John; your name shall be Cephas," which we all know means "a rock." I'm sure Peter never thought of himself as a rock-like personality, and probably no one else had either. The next few years that he spent with Jesus showed him to be hot-tempered, boastful and even cowardly. But Jesus never lost faith in him, and ultimately that faith proved to be well founded.

Why did Jesus believe in Peter even more than Peter believed in himself? Jesus saw people for exactly what they were; then he went a step further and saw what they had potential to become. He had the capacity to look into one's heart and one's soul. Jesus believed in people, all kinds of people, because he saw their possibilities. Not only did he see them, but he dedicated himself to the task of turning those possibilities into actualities. He tapped into human curiosity by asking them a question, "What are you looking for?" And they responded, "Where are you staying?" He intrigued them. Where does Jesus stay? He stays at the right hand of the Father, equal in power and glory. He stays with the curious, the seekers, the wounded and those who need healing, no matter whom, and no matter how unique or different. Jesus touches them in their unique places and in their unique needs.

As with Peter, Jesus believes in you and me. The faith Jesus had in Peter was not just a first century peculiarity. It has been his trademark through the ages and still is today. When Jesus looks at each one of us he sees everything that we are; nothing is hidden. The weakness that we try to keep concealed, Jesus knows about it. As Jesus gazes upon us he does so with compassion and love. He sees our possibilities and potential. How wonderful it would be if we gazed upon ourselves through the loving eyes of Jesus. His loving, compassionate gaze can transform us if we let it. His gaze and companionship with Peter transformed him and we too can be transformed and rise to our potential in the life giving gaze of Jesus. And this is why we give thanks as we gather at the Eucharist to share in the bread of life that is Jesus, who will never let us go.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

3rd Sunday B (Mark 1:14-20)

Our first reading from the Book of Jonah, the stubborn, self-willed, reluctant prophet, speaks to us of the struggle of an opinionated, rigidly inflexible, prejudiced character. Jonah was so stubborn and attached to his own closed minded opinion that he thought he knew better than God. This was the second time that God told Jonah to go to Ninevah to announce God's forgiveness. The first time, Jonah knew that God was forgiving those people, and Jonah didn't want those hated foreigners to repent, for he carried around within himself a lot of anger and resentment and grudges. They repented after only one day of Jonah's preaching. But Jonah struggled with his hardness of heart. He struggled to let go, to repent, to surrender to God.

And we often struggle like Jonah, to surrender our preconceived notions of how God should behave, how God should have just as hard an unforgiving heart as we do, toward other people who may have hurt us or offended us, for whom we hold grudges and resentments. Our Gospel reading from Mark tells us to repent and to believe the Good News. Repenting means that we make a 180 degree turn, a complete change of heart, a metanoia as the Greeks put it. This means a whole change of attitude, an adopting of God's attitude toward ourselves and toward each other. God's attitude toward each of us is one of a guaranteed loving forgiveness, for our God is passionately in love with us, made in God's image as we are. That attitude then extends to each other, as we reach out to them in loving forgiveness.

This attitude of forgiveness is possible for a believer only in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, not in some kind of remote acceptance of an abstract, philosophical, timeless truth. For we learn from him how to look at ourselves and at our brothers and sisters. We are called to gaze at ourselves and at one another through the forgiving, loving eyes of Jesus on the cross. And in that compassionate gaze, we can allow ourselves to be forgiven, our hearts to be touched, and we can forgive others. We can give up our resentments, our grudges, our hardness of heart, our prejudices and we can be healed in the love of Jesus. Forgiveness is one of the chief characteristics of a follower of Jesus. Jesus so wants us to celebrate our need for forgiveness, in the assurance that God can and does forgive us in our repentance, that he left us the Sacrament of Reconciliation so that Jesus' forgiving, healing presence can touch our hearts with his gift of peace.

And so we give thanks for the forgiving presence of Jesus in our lives, and we thank him for the power that comes from him to forgive one another.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

4th Sunday B (Mark 1:21-28)

I find bumper stickers fascinating, as I drive around our city and to other cities and towns as well. One can pick up the variety of issues that engage the local populace. Tailgating must be a problem in some areas. **"If you get any closer, please introduce yourself."** A more hostile one reads: **"Hit me, I need the money."** **"Question authority" still appears, especially in San Francisco or Berkeley.** I often wonder what authority is referred to, and whether it might be simply a sign of adolescent rebellion or of adult responsible questioning. Responsible questioning is a good practice, I think, but sometimes dangerous in certain parts of the world.

In Mark's Gospel today, we heard that Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach, and that he taught with authority, not like the scribes who quoted the rabbis, or the rabbis who quoted the Law. And the people were astonished and spellbound, not only because of what he taught, but because **of the authority and power of his teaching. The Greek word for this kind of authority is "exousia," or "out from himself."** Jesus didn't quote other authorities for validation of what he taught, but his teaching was self-validating, for he was the authority. And the people were spellbound, and we, his disciples 2000 years later, continue to be spellbound, for his authoritative teaching are words of life, of peace, of truth, of hope, and above all, words of love.

Jesus' authority was reflected in the power of his words to make things happen in the people who heard them, changing their lives forever. One might regard Jesus' exorcism of the demon in Mark's Gospel as an audio visual aid, a dramatic illustration of the power of his word. Here the hostile forces of **evil are vanquished by Jesus' authoritative goodness. In the ancient world, evil spirits were considered to** be cause of all maladies, physical, psychological, and spiritual. Mark emphasized that the power of evil which had tormented humanity was being overcome by a new, loving, benevolent reign of God.

And we, his 21st century disciples, are spellbound by Jesus' authoritative teaching, not just in word, but in deed, for he gave his very life for us, for each one of us, as his unique friends, simply out of deep, compassionate love. As his spellbound friends, we can then ask him to deliver us from a lack of courage, a lack of hope, a lack of trust, and a lack of love. We can ask him to open our hearts to his words of power that bring life and peace. We can ask him to remove the paralysis of fear that blocks our acceptance of the unconditional love of the Father for each one of us. We can turn to Jesus as the ultimately trustworthy one who is always there for us, and whose authority is beyond questioning. And we give thanks as we remember him in the Eucharist today.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

5th Sunday B (Mark 1:29-39)

Suffering is no fun, just ask Job. In our first reading from the Book of Job, he embarks on his extraordinary “soliloquy to suffering.” Anyone hurting could open to this passage and be able to relate to many of its verses. “Is not man’s life on earth a drudgery?” “He is a hireling who waits for his wages.” “Remember that my life is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again.” Today we would describe poor Job, mired in hopelessness, as being clinically depressed, and we would be watching for signs of suicide.

In the story of Job, we read about three friends who come to him and try to theologize about his suffering. Each one reaches the same conclusion: Job should admit his sinfulness and submit to God’s punishment. Job, however, realizes that his suffering is not a punishment from God. If not, then what? Job wrestles with the fact that he knows he hasn’t sinned grievously against God, and yet he doesn’t have an answer to why he’s suffering. Job realizes that there is more to his situation than his friends and their false limited theological views can handle. He realizes that he is faced with a mystery of life that he can’t fully understand. Job is sure he hasn’t sinned and that God is faithful. As dissonant as the mystery may appear to our cultural belief that we ought to be able to understand all aspects of life, the truth is that we can’t fully understand the mystery of suffering. All we can be sure of is that suffering is a part of human life and that God doesn’t play petty games with us. Like Job, we need to wrestle with the mystery.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus heals Peter’s mother in law, drove out the demons possessing some of the people, and healed those who were ill of various diseases. And after this exhausting day, “he went off to a deserted place where he prayed.” Faced with the mystery of his own mission, Jesus seeks out the strength of prayer in the privacy of a deserted place. Like Job, Jesus seeks the guidance and strength of his Father to make sense of the absurdities of life and the assurance of his Father’s faithful love.

We may not suffer as Job did, nor will we need to define our role as Jesus did, but without a doubt, we do and will face mysteries in our own lives. There will be things that we do not and cannot fully understand. All we can do is turn to our loving God in prayer in the deserted place of our hearts, and there find the consolation and strength that comes to us from the God who loves us with a passion, a love so deep that that love drove him to become one of us in Jesus Christ. And for this we give thanks.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.

6th Sunday B (Mark 1:40-45)

A special saint was canonized on October 11, 2009. Father Damien of Molokai is now Saint Damien. Father Damien worked and ministered among the lepers in Hawaii in the leper colony on the island of Molokai. He was devoted to the service of the outcasts of society, these lepers. He was so devoted to them that he became one of them, because he touched them and so contracted their terrible disease, and he died among them.

Sometimes touch is very healing. If we refrain from caressing a baby it will get sick and die, even if it has proper nutrition and a sterile environment. When we injure our bodies, we want the touch of a **medical professional, or when we were children, at least the kiss and rub of a mother.** When we're down in the dumps, a hug from a special friend or spouse may lift our spirits.

For Jesus, no one was untouchable. Prostitutes weren't untouchable just because they trafficked in sinful touch. Poor people weren't untouchable just because they smelled from inadequate hygiene. Lepers or other sick persons weren't untouchable just because they might be contagious. And sinners of all kinds weren't untouchable just because they had sinned.

Let's take a look at Jesus in today's Gospel. The leper approached Jesus trusting that he wouldn't be rejected, for he trusted Jesus. If anything, Jesus is approachable. Jesus was moved with pity. **He didn't walk away or gaze at the leper with disgust, but treated the leper as a person of value and dignity.** Then Jesus reached out and physically touched the leper, physically accepting him, this leper **who was ritually unclean, who couldn't enter the temple, and who couldn't sit in the company of Jews or eat with them.** The compassion of Jesus overcame any restrictions. Jesus kept his religion human and down to earth, not only by his understanding of his heavenly Father, but also by his understanding of people. People were sacred to him, and he always took them right where they were. Jesus always affirmed life in them and looked down on no one, not even lepers.

I think we have something to learn from Jesus. Perhaps an evil tendency is to look down on or diminish certain other people or groups so that we can feel superior. On a grand scale, one race looks down on another and hatred grows and wars are raged. One religious group looks down on another, and the possibility of unity is diminished. Some men look down on women and rage and abuse take place. Some of us look down on divorced people, or on gay people, or on the homeless, or on the contemporary lepers in our society, people with various addictions. Children in the womb are looked upon as having no value.

The call of Jesus to each of us is to value life in all its forms, and to seek its abundance and fullness in the Lord Jesus. To touch one another in compassion we need to be touched by Jesus and be healed and purified. In the Eucharist, he touches us, heals us and feeds us with himself, the bread of life. Let us give thanks.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.