

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners:

During the season of Lent we have been looking at how our Sunday Gospel readings instruct us to walk in the ways of spiritual freedom that Jesus Christ has won for us. Below are my remarks from last Sunday.

Without a doubt there is nothing we Americans value more than our freedom. It was why our country was founded. It is written into our Constitution and we fought a Civil War over it. We also believe that freedom is our most important export. Literally thousands of Americans have died, and many are risking their lives now, to bring the gift of freedom to other people in the world. The freedom we enjoy in this country is something that we should always be grateful for. However, we need to recognize that all the laws and all the military might in the world are useless if our spirits are not free, if we do not have spiritual freedom. This is so because freedom doesn't mean simply being able to do whatever we want. It isn't just "the right to choose." Freedom means the right to choose those things that are right and just. Freedom means being able to be faithful to God. True freedom means being spiritually free. As our national history and some of our ancestors have shown, freedom of spirit is so powerful that even people who are physically enslaved can be strong when they have spiritual freedom. But the opposite is also true. We may enjoy political and economic freedom but if our hearts are not free then we have become slaves.

The greatest threat to our spiritual freedom is sin. When we do things that are contrary to the wonderful plans God has for each of us, we limit our potential and can enslave ourselves in the process. Jesus Christ came into this world to win back for us the spiritual freedom that was lost when sin entered the world with the Fall of Adam & Eve. Faith in Jesus and the grace He brings provide us with the strength to maintain our spiritual freedom. And following the example of Christ shows us how to use the strength He provides.

By His own experience of being tempted showed us that we can overcome the temptations to live merely for pleasure, power and popularity. We do this by remembering who we are as the children of God. The Gospel passage describing Christ's transfiguration points us to another lesson in spiritual freedom. At the end of this passage which describes how Jesus was transfigured before His Apostles, God the Father says to Peter, James & John "This is my chosen Son. Listen to Him."

Now imagine if you will that we were there with Peter, James & John when they heard the voice of God say "Listen to My Son." I think we, like them, would start paying closer attention to what Jesus has to say. And when we pay close attention to what Jesus has to say in the Gospel we would notice that Jesus has different things to say to different people in His audience. Jesus did this because the people who heard Him didn't all have the same relationship with Him. When speaking to the crowds in general Jesus calls them to repentance and faith. When confronted by those who were opposed to Him, the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus challenges them to turn away from their hypocrisy and hardness of heart. Then there are the things that Jesus says to those who were already His followers. And what does Jesus have to say to them and to us?

The one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest." "Go on your way; behold I am sending you like sheep among wolves." "Rejoice because your names are written in heaven." "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." "When you pray, say 'Our Father...'" "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you" "Fear not...even the hairs on your head have been counted." "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat..." "Do not be afraid any longer for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom." "Where your treasure is there also will your heart be." "You cannot serve both God and mammon." "If your brother sins against you seven times a day and seven times says

‘I repent’ you must forgive him.” “You should pray always and never lose heart.” “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them.” “Take and eat, this is my Body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” “Peace be with you. Why are you troubled? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.”

These are just some of the things that Jesus says to His disciples. But one of our Lord’s most frequent commands to His followers is “Do not be afraid.”

In telling us not to be afraid Jesus identifies the second greatest threat to our spiritual freedom after sin and that is fear. Some of us have fears about our financial situations. Others fear for their health. Then there is the state of the world in which we live, war, crime & the environment. And all of us I suppose have fears regarding death. Our fear of suffering, and the consequences that follow—anxiety, hopelessness and depression—can limit our spiritual freedom. Once we are gripped by fear all the armies of the world cannot set us free from its oppression. When fear chains our spirits we need spiritual tools to break free. And that is why Jesus keeps telling us to pray and how to pray. Jesus says, when you pray, say “Our Father...” He is saying “every time you pray remember your identity as the beloved children of your heavenly Father.” And when we pray we should bring before the Lord our fears and anxieties for ourselves, our families and our world. We should also pray for greater faith for the stronger our faith in the Lord is the less we will be oppressed by fear.

Yes we are fortunate to live in the land of the free. But there can be no real freedom without a sense of one’s true dignity as a loved child of God who has been called to rise above sin and fear.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley