

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners:

During this Lenten season we have been considering how our Sunday readings instruct us on the ways to spiritual freedom that Jesus Christ has won for us. Below are my remarks from last weekend.

With my prayers,
Fr. Conley

Like the people in today's Gospel, when we hear of tragedies and disasters, we may wonder, "Is God punishing these people?" Some people have the same thoughts when they are suddenly stricken with some calamity or disease. I've had people who are in such circumstances ask me: "Is God punishing me for some reason?" The answer of course is the one that Jesus gives "By no means." However, Jesus says that these tragedies should remind us that we are not in this world forever and our passing can come suddenly. Therefore, we want to hold on to the spiritual freedom that Jesus Christ won back for us by His death and resurrection.

The greatest threat to our spiritual freedom is sin. On the first Sunday of Lent we heard how Jesus resisted the temptation to sin by remembering who He is as the Son of God. We too can resist the slavery of sin and maintain our spiritual freedom by remembering who we are. Holding fast to our identity as the redeemed children of God our Father is one of the keys in preserving the spiritual freedom that Jesus has won for us.

Last Sunday we heard how 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. Our fear of suffering, and the consequences that follow— anxiety, hopelessness, and depression—can limit our spiritual freedom. When we allow fear to dominate our thinking we lose the peace of mind the Lord wants us to have. We also undermine the credibility of the Gospel itself and therefore are not good messengers to others. So listening to Jesus and not being afraid is another key to spiritual freedom.

We can see a third key to spiritual freedom illustrated in our first reading today from the Book of Exodus. In this passage we hear of how God called Moses. Although he didn't know it, from the moment of his birth God had great plans for Moses. As a baby Moses was saved from being deliberately drowned in the Nile River by the Pharaoh's servants along with the other Hebrew children. Then God arranged for Moses to be raised in the Pharaoh's palace and to receive all the benefits of being raised as a prince. The Lord also provided Moses with a wife and family. However, up until Moses was about forty years old, he didn't seem to have much purpose in life. Then, as we hear in today's reading, Moses experienced the Lord speaking to him from the burning bush and it changed everything. God revealed to Moses the purpose of his life and it was to love and serve the Lord. Moses was to do this specifically by leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. If you read further beyond the passage we have today you will see that Moses struggled to accept the fact that the purpose of his life was not to do what he wanted but to do what God wanted. In fact, Moses tries several times to get out of his mission and even tells the Lord to find someone else. Moses had to come to terms with the fact, as we all do, that when it comes to the purpose of my life: "It's not about me."

Now when the Bible proclaims this truth our fallen human nature instinctively resists and responds "*It's not? How could it be that the purpose of my life is not about me?*" Isn't your life all about you? Aren't you the center of your own little universe just like I am the center of mine?" This is a basic truth of life which men and women have been resisting since Adam & Eve and our resistance to it undermines our spiritual freedom. As Rick Warren put it in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, "The purpose of your life is far greater than your

own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet you must begin with God. You were born *by* His purpose and *for* His purpose."

In order to experience the truth that loving and serving God is indeed the purpose of our lives and the only way to real freedom we need to accept what Jesus teaches about our priorities. Our Lord is very clear that God alone deserves our ultimate loyalty. By contrast, serving myself first is a sure route to unhappiness. It is actually in our nature to want to give of ourselves to others in mutual love. All of us want to know that our lives have made a difference to someone. However, another part of our fallen nature is to think always of ourselves first. And when we give in to these selfish desires it hinders us from giving ourselves to others out of love. Another obstacle to our understanding of the true purpose of our lives is to confuse our profession with our purpose. For example, if I make working at a particular job or building a business my purpose in life, then what meaning does my life have when I can no longer work?

It is harder to accept but equally true that not even loving and serving your spouses and families can be the ultimate purpose of your lives. For those of you who have been called to the vocation of matrimony and family life— living out that beautiful vocation is indeed your calling. However, your vocation to marriage must conform to your higher purpose of loving and serving God. This is why Jesus says we must be willing if necessary to leave spouse and family behind in order to follow Him. The people we love are God's gifts to us but it would be wrong to love the gifts more than the giver Himself. Additionally, as loving as they may be, your spouse or other loved ones can never fully satisfy your desire for unending and unconditional love and it would be unfair to expect them to. Besides, to say that loving and serving your husband or wife is the ultimate purpose of your life would be to say that your life had no purpose before you met them and will have no purpose when they are gone. This is simply not true.

So, if we want to know what will give meaning and purpose to our lives we must look to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, our way, truth and life, was never about Himself. Jesus is always about the will of God the Father and loving us out of love for the Father. The dying to ourselves that Jesus calls us to means accepting, happily, that indeed, *it isn't about me*. We are called to live for the Lord and to be transformed from being all about ourselves to being all about God and all about others out of love for Him. Knowing accepting and rejoicing that this is the ultimate purpose of my life is a key step to spiritual freedom.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley