

OK, RISUS PASCHALIS! EASTER JOKE! A man went on vacation and arranged for his mother to stay at his house and take care of his cat. And, just to be sure, he asked his next-door neighbor if he would look in on them every day and make sure they were all right. "No problem," said the neighbor. The man flew off to Mexico and after a couple of days, he called the neighbor and asked how things were going.

"Well," the neighbor said, "your cat died." "Geez," the guy said, "You have to come right out and tell me like that? Couldn't you have a little more consideration? I'm on vacation. Couldn't you have broken it to me a little more gently? Like first telling me that the cat was on the roof, then that the cat fell off the roof, then maybe the next day telling me you had taken the cat to the vet – like that, not boom all at once! By the way, how's my mom doing?"

"Well," said the neighbor, "She went up on the roof...."

First, I want to dig into a little bit of background on a concept that keeps coming up in the scriptures. And that is adoption. It's referenced a bit obliquely in the Gospel passage as Jesus says "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you." Paul speaks frequently in his letters that we have become adopted sons and daughters, children of our heavenly Father. In the ancient world, in Greek and Roman law, a father had complete power over his blood children. He could do literally whatever he wanted with them. If he was in debt, he could sell them to pay off the debt. He could punish them by death.

But also in Greek and Roman law, if you had ADOPTED a child, you could not. Because you had CHOSEN them. They were yours forever. This is why the Scriptures keep returning to the fact that we are ADOPTED sons and daughters of God. We were chosen. In love. Forever.

Jesus promised to remain with us always through the Holy Spirit ---because we are the adopted sons and daughters of God; we are not orphans. I am convinced that the greatest spiritual problem in most people's lives is that they don't know who they really are. They don't know that they are beloved sons and daughters. So we literally ADOPT all kinds of pseudo-identities "I'm a Yankees fan." "I'm a Republican or Democrat." "I'm from the WOLFPACK NATION." If we don't know that we are loved in this world, we don't know who we really are. So we are forever chasing after stuff/things/money/position/degrees/cars/homes that we think will give us an identity. But we already HAVE an identity – adopted sons and daughters. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians (4:4-7): "When the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption...." It doesn't get any better than that.

A woman was teaching a second grade Faith Formation Class, and on the first day she was asking everyone their ages and birthdays. There were two brothers in the class. One of the 2 boys said, "We're both 7. My birthday is April 8, 2013, and my brother's is April 25th, 2013."

The teacher was a little confused and said, "But that's impossible!"

The other brother said, "No, it's not, one of us is adopted."

Before she was even aware that she had asked, the words came out, "Which one?"

The boys looked at each other and smiled. Then one of them said, “We asked Dad that a while ago, but he just said he loved us, and he couldn’t remember any more which one was adopted.”

It is a wonderful thing to be blessed, to be chosen, to be adopted. It doesn’t mean that God loves us any more than He loves everyone else. It doesn’t mean that life is going to be any easier for us than it is for anyone else. What it means is that our lives have meaning and purpose. We have a mission to share this adopted love status with all we meet. (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2018, p. 19-20)

Do you know down to your toes who you are? You are a child of God! You need to always remember that. Author Steve McVey says it another way. He says that we are God’s work of art. He cites Ephesians 2:10: “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.” The word ‘workmanship’ is the Greek word *poema*, from which we get the English word ‘poem.’ He writes, “God has made you to be a heavenly piece of poetry on this earth!” (DYNAMIC PREACHING, King Duncan, Oct-Dec 2017, p. 83-84) I love that – we are made to be heavenly pieces of poetry on this earth!

Second, a word from the Gospel. My favorite word IN the gospel. LOVE. GOD is Love. LOVE is everything, because GOD is IN everything. As our AT HOME WITH THE WORD books put it so beautifully this week: “Jesus reminds His followers of His call to follow His commandment of love: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Love is at the heart of every relationship, especially our relationship with God and with our neighbor. We share in the very life of God, a life of love: “Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father.”

As I reminded you last week, we are reading from the Last Supper Discourse, Jesus’ last major rallying cry before His arrest and crucifixion. He needed to know which of His disciples would tough it out and follow His example, and which ones would give up and walk away. Which ones would fall on their sword for Him and which ones would fall to pieces.

The test for us as His disciples right now is COVID-19. It’s easy to say that we are a Christian when things are going well. We have all kinds of people and things that use the word Christian. We say we are a Christian nation. We don’t risk persecution by declaring our faith. We have Christian radio stations and Christian movie streaming services, Christian book clubs. Celebrities give interviews on their faith in Christ. Just about every major presidential candidate claims to be a Christian, or at least to respect Christian values. Christians in our culture look and act just like everybody else. So how do you know who are the REAL disciples?

The criteria is from Jesus Himself: “If you love me, keep my commands.” If we don’t keep His commands, no amount of Christian t-shirts and Christian podcasts and soul-searching small group discussions will help. If we love Him, we will keep His commands.

So what are Jesus’ commands? We could look at the very first command Jesus made in the gospel of John 1:43, when he told Philip, “Follow me.” Or we could look at His last command in John 21:22, when He told Peter, “You must follow me.” But in between these first and last chapters, Jesus gave a crystal-clear command that was at the very heart of His ministry 2000 years ago and is still the heart of His ministry to this very day. It’s in John 13:34-35: “I give you a new commandment: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this will all know you are my disciples: By your love for one another.”

It’s not what Jesus wished for us or recommended for us. It’s what He COMMANDED us to do. It’s non-negotiable. But every survey you read about how NON-Christians perceive Christian people has nothing to do with love. We are perceived as judgmental, obsessed by abortion and homosexuality, and other than

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that, are little different from everyone else. And we wonder why people are not coming to church? (DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2020, p. 41) It's all about love. Are WE all about love? If we are all about love, we are all about God. Period. Hoarding, rejection of immigrants, rejection of anyone different or marginalized, gay, transgender, foreign, is not love. It's not Christ. It's not God. What kind of disciples are we? If we are not more loving this year than last, we've got it wrong, and we need a course correction.

Third, I love this line from the 1st letter of Peter that we just heard: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence..." How is our hope quotient 2 months into Covid world? I'd like this last part of my homily to be 'an upbeat word for a downbeat world!' If we are wallowing in despair and gloom then we are not being true to our calling as disciples of Christ. In C.S. Lewis' words, we live in a God-invaded world. Even in time of pandemic. And where God is, there is hope.

This is not to ignore the realities of our world. It is not to be pollyannish about COVID-19. But we are not COVID-19. COVID-19 is not the world. It's just one more test for trying-to-mature disciples. In a sense, as disciples of Christ, we are MADE for this. We are made to be tested, purified in faith. It's how we grow and become more loving.

My favorite few lines about hope are from Emily Dickinson; "'Hope is the thing with feathers – That perches in the soul – And sings the tune without the words – And never stops at all."

Vaclav Havel talks about hope, calling it 'an orientation of the spirit, of the heart.' To orient, we know, is to face eastward toward the horizon that sees the sun rising. It is a perfect image for finding our bearings. Hope is a stance in life, a turning toward something that is true, the 'sun of justice' in the prophet Malachi's phrase. Hope is then standing in that position always – no matter what the circumstances. We are to hope for what is right and good and just. Chesterton said that "Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate." Have you noticed how a lot of people are not even being friendly right now? Normally this genteel southern tradition of uber-friendliness reigns – but I'll be out walking and say hello to folks and they just stare at me like I'm carrying a loaded machine gun. Come on! My COVID-SHAGGY lack-of-haircut doesn't look THAT BAD! We can at least smile at one another and greet one another! And it's kind of funny finding out what color some women's hair really is! We are not going to give in to desperation and despair! W. T. Purkiser said that "The future belongs to those who belong to God. THIS is hope!" We belong to God. We belong to the future! We will get through this! And lastly, Corrie Ten Boom reminds us that "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer." Trust the engineer, folks. He's in charge of this train – we're just along for the ride! AMEN!