

OK, your last Risus Paschalis, or Easter joke. Then it's back to my usual boring 3 points – but more boring without jokes!

A plane develops engine trouble in mid-flight. There are 3 passengers and the pilot on board – a boy scout, a priest, and an atomic scientist. The pilot rushes back to the passenger compartment and exclaims, "The plane is going down! The plane is going down! We only have 3 parachutes, and there are 4 of us!" Then the pilot adds, "I have a family waiting for me at home. I must survive!" With that, he grabs one of the parachutes and jumps out of the plane.

At this point, the atomic scientist jumps to his feet and declares, "I am the smartest man in the world. It would be a great tragedy if my life was snuffed out!" With that, he also grabs a parachute and exits the plane.

With an alarmed look on his face, the priest says to the Boy Scout, "My son, I have no family. I am ready to meet my Maker. You are still young with much ahead of you. You take the last parachute."

At that, the Boy Scout interrupts the priest, "Relax, Father. Don't say any more. We're all right."

The priest asks, "How in the world can you say that we are all right?"

The Scout replies, "The world's smartest man just jumped out of the plane wearing my knapsack!"

First, some gospel background. Jesus tells His disciples that He has a great deal more He wants to tell them and teach them but that they can't handle everything He wants to say to them. Then Jesus says that He is going to send them the "Spirit of Truth," who will speak and guide them in the future. This Spirit "takes what is mine and will proclaim it to you." (16:14)

All that sounds strange, otherworldly, and yet I believe that there are many of you here today who know from personal experience exactly what Jesus is talking about. You already know the presence and work of Jesus operative in your life through the Spirit of Truth.

Any time we hear something in a conversation, read something in a book, or EVEN hear something in a sermon-- that touches a deep place in our heart, something that is heard as if some light is being switched on and for the first time we see and understand. I think that this is the everyday, ordinary experience of the work of the Spirit of Truth.

It's interesting that Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the "Spirit of Truth." Not the indomitable human spirit or team spirit, or spirit of love. Truth. And we know how hard it can be to hear truths, particularly when it's truth that we don't want to hear, maybe some truth that's painful or will require us to live – or vote -- in a different way. As we often say, "the truth hurts."

It didn't take me long as a young priest to figure out what a challenge it is to be a truthful preacher, not necessarily because I'm a coward, which I am. But it's hard to be a truthful preacher because it's tough to tell potentially painful truths to people that you have learned to love. It doesn't take long in my line of work to learn that many of you are already living difficult, challenging lives. Why should I make your lives any more difficult by telling you that Jesus expects faithfulness, courage, and witness from us?

But then I hear Jesus say to me, like in this Sunday's Gospel, "Speaking to my people is not your job. It's my job. I love them enough to continue to be with them and reveal myself to them. I'll help you preach truth: I'll send you the Spirit of Truth."

It takes a lifetime to learn how to talk and listen and walk -- like Christians. Christians are those who, at least on a weekly basis, bend our lives toward the living, God-breathed, all-consuming word of God that demands to have authority over all of our lives.

When we are listening for the truth, whether it be listening through Bible study, prayer, or a sermon -- or we are simply going about our daily life expecting that God may use any opportunity to address us -- we can expect to be surprised because, let's face it: God's ways are not our ways (Is 55:9). We are daring to listen for God's truth, not merely comfortable confirmation of our little, partial truths.

That means that when listening to a sermon, the correct response is not: "Do I agree with this?" or "Is this congruent with what I have always assumed?" Rather, faithful listening requires deeper questions like "How must my life change in order to be better conformed to this truth? How would our congregation need to be different to be more clearly God's church?"

True, Jesus said that the truth would make us free (Jn 8:32), but true disciples would add that the truth often makes us miserable before setting us free. In such painful attentiveness to the truth about God is our salvation. If we hear a sermon and respond, "Yes, that's what I've always thought," listen again; we probably heard it wrong.

Speaking and listening like Christians calls for vulnerability to the mysterious comings and goings of the Holy Spirit. Jesus clearly says that the Spirit of Truth is a gift. Grace. Grace isn't grace if it's predictable and programmed. Only God can speak of God. Faithful hearing of God's truth requires the descent and intervention of the Holy Spirit in order for the word of God to be received. If we are doing everything church-wise the same as we did it when we were a child -- we are most likely way off the mark of true, mature discipleship. We need to recall over and over again that the heart of the gospel is conversion, change. It is not static, nor is it risk-adverse. And it ALWAYS requires change.

It's interesting that our Catholic tradition has preachers pray a prayer before we get to the pulpit. When Deacon Rich or I bow, the prayer is "May the Lord be in my mind and my heart that I may worthily proclaim His Gospel." I always add, "Do not let this congregation go away hungry because of my sin." I feel it necessary to remind God that HE got me into this and I'm so not worthy -- so He needs to guard -- and guide -- my big fat mouth.

One of you told me that before you go into some difficult meeting or tough situation, you say a little prayer: "Lord, help me here. Show me the way I should go. Give me the right words to say. Thanks." In the light of what Jesus says to His disciples about the gift of the Spirit, I think that prayer is just perfect for all of us trying to do God's will. (All of this adapted from Willimon, in PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2021, p. 25-26)

Second, an example of someone who listened with an open heart. Clarence Jordan was the founder of the Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia. It was set up to be an interracial community long before anyone knew what civil rights were all about. Jordan himself was a pacifist as well as an integrationist and thus was not a popular figure in Georgia, even though he came from a prominent family. The Koinonia Farm, by its very nature, was controversial, and of course, it was in trouble. In the early 50's, Clarence approached his brother Robert Jordan (later a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court) to ask him to legally represent the Koinonia Farm. They were having trouble getting LP gas delivered for heating during the winter even

*"This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources."*

though it was against the law not to deliver gas. Clarence thought Robert could do much through a simple phone call. However, Robert responded to Clarence's request: "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything, too, Bob."

"It's different for you," Bob said.

"Why is it different?" Clarence asked. "I remember that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me the same question he did you. He asked: 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said 'Yes.' What did you say?"

"I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be – the cross?"

"That's right. I follow Him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you're a disciple, Bob. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of His. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer, but not a disciple."

"Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?"

"The question," Clarence said, "is, 'Do you HAVE a Church?'" (Stanley Hauerwas, cited in "When we don't 'carry' Jesus far enough," ODYSSEY WEB SITE, June 21, 2004)

The problem is that this Truth thing is tied up with this very human thing – all of us – the Church.

So third, and finally, a word on the Church. It's mixed up, screwed up, sinned up. I know more about it than any of you. I'm also mixed up, screwed up, and sinned up. I struggle to speak the truth. And perhaps as importantly, to speak the truth in love. And I struggle even more to LIVE the truth. I find great solace in these words of Carlo Carretto, with which I conclude:

How baffling you are, oh Church, yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms.

No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, though not completely. And besides, where would I go? Would I establish another? I would not be able to establish it without the same faults, for they are the same faults I carry in me. And if I did establish another, it would be my Church, not the Church of Christ. I am old enough to know that I am no better than anyone else...

The Church has the power to make me holy but it is made up, from the first to the last, only of sinners. And what sinners! It has the omnipotent and invincible power to renew the Miracle of the Eucharist, but is made up of people who are stumbling in the dark, who fight every day against the temptation of losing their faith. It brings a message of transparency but it is incarnated in slime, such is the substance of the world. It speaks of the sweetness of its Master, of its non-violence, but there was a time in history when it sent out its

armies to disembowel infidels and torture heretics. It proclaims the message of evangelical poverty, and yet it does nothing but look for money and alliances with the powerful.

Those who dream of something different from this are wasting their time and have to rethink it all. And this proves that they do not understand humanity. Because this is humanity, made visible by the Church, with all its flaws and its invincible courage, with the Faith that Christ has given it and with the love that Christ showers on it.

When I was young, I did not understand why Jesus chose Peter as His successor, the first Pope, even though he abandoned Christ. Now I am no longer surprised -- and I understand that by founding His church on the tomb of a traitor.....He was warning each of us to remain humble, by making us aware of our fragility.

What matters is the promise of Christ, what matters is the cement that unites, which is the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit is capable of building the church with such poorly molded bricks as are we.

And that is where the mystery lies. This mixture of good and bad, of greatness and misery, of holiness and sin that makes up the church.....this in reality am I.

The deep bond between God and His Church, is an intimate part of each one of us....To each of us God says, as He says to His Church, "And I will betroth you to me forever." (Hos 2:21). But at the same time He reminds us of reality: "Your lewdness is like rust. I have tried to remove it in vain. There is so much that not even a flame will take it away." (Ez 24:12)

But then there is even something more beautiful. The Holy Spirit who is Love, sees us as holy, immaculate, beautiful under our guises of thieves and adulterers....It's as if evil cannot touch the deepest part of humankind.

He re-establishes our virginity no matter how many times we have prostituted our bodies, spirits and hearts. In this, God is truly God, the only one who can 'make everything new again.' It is not so important that He will renew heaven and earth. What is most important is that He will renew our hearts. This is Christ's work. This is the divine Spirit of the Church."

HAPPY BIRTHDAY CHURCH! Let the Church say Amen.