

On Fire – Confirmation Conference  
Feast of the Chair of St. Peter  
2/22/14

Isn't anyone tryin' to find me?  
Won't somebody come take me home?  
It's a darn cold night  
I'm tryin' to figure out this life  
Won't you, take me by the hand?  
Take me somewhere new  
I don't know who you are  
But I, I'm with you (Avril Lavigne, 2002)

These words, from a popular song a few years ago, ache with loneliness and desperation. Confused and lost, the singer wanted to feel wanted. Someone's, anyone's company would do. Sounds like someone on the first day in a new school. Maybe, this person just walked into a new class or joins a new team. Something may have happened – a break-up, an argument, a divorce in the family. Someone lost a job or a home. Someone is diagnosed with cancer or another serious disease. It does not take that much to have a “darn cold night” or feel like you cannot figure out this life.

In moments such as these, finding someone, being with someone is important but knowing who that someone is and learning who we are, is even more important.

In Spanish we have a saying, “Dime con quien anda y te digo quien eres.” (Tell me who you are with and I'll tell you who you are.)

Jesus poses a tough question to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16.13-19) The question is not just about who is Jesus. The question is also about who are the disciples. Their relationship with Jesus helped them discover their true selves.

Peter not only recognized the true identity of Jesus. He also was acknowledging a deep desire in his heart to know the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Peter realized he wanted to be saved. He wanted something, someone more than a hero, a superstar, a celebrity. He wanted someone to hold him, heal him, and help him find a home.

Once Peter could see Jesus clearly. He also saw himself more clearly. He went from being a fisherman to being a fisher of men. Being a friend of Jesus, he became a man with a mission. With Jesus, Peter had a mission and a message.

Let Jesus ask you that question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Ask Jesus the same question, “Who do you say that I am?” He will tell you, “You are the light of the World.” “You are the salt of the earth.” “You can be a City on a hill.” “You are the one in whom my Father takes great delight.” “I am the vine. You are the branches.” “You are my friend.”

So in response to that sad song:

Jesus has already found you. Jesus will take you home. He is the warm light in that darn cold night. He will help out figure out this life. He will take you by the hand and take you somewhere new. He knows who you are and will reveal himself to you. He says to you always, "I'm with you."

Seventh Sunday of the Year  
2/23/14  
Cycle A

In the last line of today's reading, the Lord Jesus calls the disciples to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt. 5. 38-48) These words explain why Jesus pushes his disciples to what may sound like an extreme, unreasonable charity:

“When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well.”

“Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles.”

“Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you.”

None of this would be possible unless we know that perfect love of which Jesus spoke: be perfect as my heavenly father is perfect. One of the letters of John helps us understand this. The first letter of John says, “We love because he first loved us.” (1 Jn.4.19) God loved us first. God is the one who took the initiative. Jesus demonstrated this concretely when after washing the feet of his disciples he told them, “What I have done, so you must do.” We can understand from this that we can only love when we have been loved by God. We can only give what has been given to us.

God’s love is a creative love. That is how the world was created. Out of love God created the heavens and earth. For

love, he created each one of us. This is the perfect love to which Jesus calls us. God the Father calls us to live the same way we are loved by Him.

The love of which Jesus speaks in the gospel is difficult to fathom. We are more inclined to go along with the commandment we heard in the first reading from the Book of Leviticus, to love our neighbor as ourselves. This commandment is good definition of justice, to treat another person the way we want to be treated. That's fair, equitable. It is just to treat someone else the one way one expects to be treated. In the gospel today, Jesus goes beyond that. He makes clear the difference between justice and charity.

There can be the notion that justice is a higher standard than charity. Justice gives more than charity. For Jesus, it is the reverse. Charity presumes justice and goes beyond it. Today's reading makes that clear: "If you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?"

Charity is the love of Jesus that not only heals the world. Charity is the work of a new creation. The standard is not how others treat us. God's love, revealed in the person of Jesus, is

how we are to live if we are truly to be the children of God. What could happen if the love of the crucified Jesus becomes the measure with which we measure ourselves?

After almost 30 years in prison, Nelson Mandela, did the unthinkable. Upon his release in 1990, he pardoned his oppressors and led the way to reconciling a divided South Africa. His was a struggle for justice but what he achieved went beyond justice. The determination to forgive serves as a glimmer of the courage charity requires.

In our own country, not too many years ago, racism divided the country and frustrated the promise of liberty and justice for all. Upon the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King rose to speak to a throng of over a quarter million people gathered in the Capital Mall on August 28, 1963. He said, referring to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, "But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination." These memories could have embittered any heart, but from the heart and the mouth of Dr. King came the words of a dream, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. ... Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." He called the

great crowd to dream with him, “With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”

Dr. King fought for justice but was an indomitable charity charged by a fervent faith in Jesus that filled his dream with an amazing grace.

Jesus’ commandments are not an excuse for the weak and timid. These are instructions for the strong and nourishment for the brave. Jesus was creating a new Genesis, a new creation story. He asks each one of us to create a new heavens and a new earth with the love of God. We must first know the love that has created us in order to give the love that can recreate the world anew.

St. Paul asks us, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” Many of us do not know this. If we know, maybe we are not sure we believe it.

You are the temple of God. God’s goodness, wisdom and joy dwells in you. The spirit of God’s charity and courage dwells in you. Do not fear to be what God’s love has created you to be. Do hesitate to give the love that God has given you to give.

