

Regional Reconciliation and Hope Service
St. Mary Our Mother
Romans 5:1-11
Mark 12:28-34
Sunday, March 9, 2008

Two words – ***Reconciliation*** and ***Hope***.

We use both these words in conversations or preaching. But what do they really mean?

Reconciliation is about restoring what had been. It is a term we use in relationships when we have done something to harm one another and wish to undo that harm. This requires *humility* to admit when we are the one who has done something wrong. It requires *forgiveness* and *mercy* when we are the one who has been wronged. Either way it requires some level of trust between all the people involved. Trust has been broken and needs to be restored.

The same is true in our relationship with God. We do things, called sin, that offend God and we need to be humble enough to admit this to do something about it – to seek God’s forgiveness. We can say we are sorry to God and ask for his forgiveness at any time but God has given us a special way of doing this – the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Note that I am using the name “Sacrament of Reconciliation.” We most often call it either *penance* or *confession*. Either is part of the sacrament. We receive a penance and we do confess our sins but God already knows what we have done. Historically, the rite was called the Rite of Penance. The word we translate as penance is *metanoia*. It is perhaps better translated as “conversion.” That is what we seek in the Sacrament – not

just to be absolved from our past sins but to grow (conversion) in our relationship with Jesus so that we stop sinning.

We are all aware of how, when we confess our sins, that we often end up doing the same things over and over. This leads to our second word – hope.

We *hope* that we can stop sinning and turn our hearts completely over to God. Yet, this is a struggle. If we knew we could do it on our own and easily, it would not be hope. It would just be the way things are. In *hope* we desire it and have trust that it will come one day, with God's help.

Hope is future-oriented. It looks past the things of today to what will come. Hope transcends earthly things looking for something beyond this world that is a better future and changes the way we see things in this world. Our hope in the promises of Christ strengthens us in our resolve as we live through the sufferings of this world. Pope Benedict wrote in his encyclical, *Spes Salvi*, “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

Sometimes we lose this *gift of hope* and drift away from the Church. We may stop going to church or we come, whether it be often or seldom, but feel like we just don't connect to God or that it doesn't mean much in our daily lives.

This does not mean we have lost our faith completely. God gives us the seed of faith. Baptism leaves an indelible mark on us. But sometimes we need the time to reflect on the past so that we may work, with the help of God, for a better future.

Think of the readings for the past three Sundays and how the people come to a greater faith. The Samaritan women at the well, at the beginning of the story, has no idea who Jesus is. But she is open to listening to him and comes to believe he is the messiah!

Last week, the man born blind believed in Jesus as a prophet but needed Jesus to open his spiritual eyes to see that Jesus is the Son of Man. And today – the story of Lazarus – Martha believed that Jesus could have helped her sick brother and she believes in the resurrection but she does not understand that Jesus is the Resurrection until he raises Lazarus.

Are our hearts open to God speaking to us? St. Augustine said (quoted in *Spes Salvi*) “

Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey [a symbol of God’s tenderness and goodness]; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?

If we want to open our hearts to have Jesus enter more fully into our lives, then we need to get rid of the vinegar.

One of the steps in doing this is to seek forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our sins cloud our judgment. But it isn’t just about listing our sins and asking Jesus to erase them. We need to think in future terms – what is it that we seek – the kingdom and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us there. However, there is something therapeutic about saying our sins aloud to admit what truly bothers us.

What is the source of our *hope*? How do we know can be reconciled with God? Both of these questions have the same answer – the Cross?

It is on the Cross that Jesus pays the price for our sins, the price that is too high for us to pay ourselves. But by Jesus’ action on the Cross, we know God stands ready to forgive us if we let him. We are not reconciled to God on our own but because he first shows his love for us. God draws us to him through the hope he offers us on the cross. It is natural for us, as humans, to hope and it is proper for that hope to find its home in God.

In confessing our sins, we are saying that we place our hope in Jesus and wish to grow in our relationship with him. To me, celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation is just the first step of this. If we wish to grow in our relationship with God, we must ask ourselves what it is that he asks of us and then do it.

To me this is what our new diocesan spiritual renewal, entitled *Spirit Alive*, is all about. One definition of renewal I read is the

Renovation in the sense of restoring a practice, custom, or institution to its original meaning or purpose (Hardon, 463).

While another describes “to renew” as “to take up again.” What we seek in our renewal is to find God, who is our meaning and our purpose in life.

According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament Torah. If we want to do God’s will do we have to learn all 613? Or in our Roman Catholic Church do we need to learn all the dogmas and doctrines the Church has developed in its 2,000 year history. It would be good if we could and I encourage you to learn what you can to understand how God calls you to live and act. But, quite frankly, the thought of having to learn *all* of that doesn’t inspire me with *hope*.

Nonetheless, the law is good as it comes from God. Jesus himself says he comes not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

There is *hope!* Jesus upholds the Law but in the gospel he puts it in simple terms. When one of the teachers of the Law of Moses asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment, Jesus does not turn to the Ten Commandments. He first turns to Deuteronomy 6:4-5 to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – to love God with everything we do. Then Jesus offers a second greatest commandment from Leviticus 19:18 – to love our neighbor as ourselves.

The teacher tells Jesus what he has said is right for the commandments to love are more important than all the sacrifices and offerings we could make. What Jesus wants is for us to love him and love others.

God's love for us is perfect. Our love for him is genuine but imperfect. We do need to pray, to study, and to learn to grow in our relationship with Jesus. Next year, our spiritual renewal will focus on growing in knowledge and understanding of scripture and then what it means to be a disciple. As long as we genuinely try, Jesus will lead us the rest of the way.

I began with two words – Reconciliation and hope.

Now I end with three words – reconciliation, hope, and love.

May we always know God's love.