

HOMILY SUNDAY 21 – A (Homily 02)

“The Church - Founded on Faith, Forgiveness and Love”

(Isaiah 22:15, 19-23; Psalm 138; Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20)

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A Russian army general once had an audience with Pope John XXIII. He boasted that given another fifty years, communism would destroy the Church. The pope responded quite lightheartedly that boast was impossible, because, as he put it, “We Catholics have been trying to do that for centuries and we still have not succeeded.”

The readings today invite us to pray for the faith of Peter, and the ability to live out that faith as Jesus did, through love and forgiveness.

In one sense, this Gospel passage is about the foundation of the Church. Actually, there are four significant scripture passages in the New Testament that deal with the birth of the Church – this gospel passage, the Pentecost account, the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the shores of Lake Tiberias and his appearance to the disciples in the upper room.

The most obvious passage, of course, is the Pentecost event, when the gift of the Spirit came upon the fearful disciples and transformed them into courageous proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Pentecost Sunday is the day we officially celebrate the birthday of the Church.

Today’s Gospel, however, along with the other two passages mentioned, not only touch on the founding of the Church, but also teach us the core of the life of the church, faith lived out through love and forgiveness.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks the famous question about his identity. “Who do they say he is? Peter makes an amazing leap of faith when he responds that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That statement would be considered blasphemy by the Jewish leaders, whose faith lay squarely on the belief that there was only one God, whose name they dared not even mention. Faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, then, is the foundation stone of the Church, and the rock upon which Jesus would build his Church.

The appearance of Jesus to Peter and the other disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberias, however, adds another foundation stone that balances the faith of Peter. In that appearance, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. It seems that for

Jesus, a relationship of love is just as important as strong faith for the future leader of the Church. So faith and love are the foundation stones of the life of the Church.

That three-fold profession of love by Peter, however, is also a reminder of how much he has been forgiven. He, who denied Jesus three times, is reminded three times how even that sin of denial has been forgiven. In fact, that experience of being forgiven can be seen as the criteria for leadership in the Church for Peter, Having experienced the love of Jesus for him through forgiveness, added on to the faith that he had already expressed in who Jesus is, now qualifies Peter to be the first pope, the chief shepherd of the Church that Jesus was founding.

The last scripture passage mentioned earlier is the appearance of Jesus in the Upper Room. Again, this is an experience on the part of the disciples of Jesus' forgiveness. They had betrayed him in Judas, denied him in Peter, and all had abandoned him and run away when he was arrested. They had every reason to be afraid, but there was only forgiveness, peace and joy when Jesus appeared. They were forgiven, and now were ready to become the Church, the Body of Christ in the world.

In fact, for John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, the appearance of Jesus in the upper room is the Pentecost event, in which Jesus breathes on the apostles, gives them the Holy Spirit, empowers them to forgive as he has forgiven all humanity, and sends them out just as the Father had sent him into the world, to show that the new life of the Church and of the kingdom is love and forgiveness.

It is virtually the same in the ending of today's Gospel. Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, and the power to forgive, or withhold forgiveness, with the amazing promise that what happens here on earth will be ratified in heaven.

When genuine forgiveness happens in human relationships here on earth, the kingdom of heaven is made more present and real. That is a mind-boggling reality that we can never appreciate enough. Faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, and living out that faith through love and forgiveness, is the life blood of the Church.

A young man by the name of Albert struggled with his father's workaholicism for years. His instinct was to try to convince his father that he had raised his sons the wrong way, so he argued with him and wrote angry letters to him to no avail. Their relationship only worsened. Finally, through the help of the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, he realized that he could not change his father; that he

had to work on himself. His moral inventory helped him see his own wrong-doing, how he had treated his father so badly for so many years. He shared that with his sponsor, and realized that in many ways he had become just like his father, critical and resentful. It dawned on Albert that if he was acting like his father, perhaps he was feeling like his father. That awareness, that his father was a 78 year old man full of painful emotions like those he was feeling, helped him finally understand his father, and all the anger melted away. He had forgiven his father in an instant through that new understanding and awareness. He drove home that weekend, apologized to his father, and told him for the first time in his life that he loved him. His father never said a word, but he changed overnight. The war between them was over. They were reconciled and had two good years together before his father died. Albert had lived out his faith in Jesus through love and forgiveness, and now experiences the new life of the kingdom of God, peace and joy.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is an act of faith in the love of Jesus for us demonstrated on the cross as love and forgiveness. We who listen to his Word and receive his Body and Blood are molded into his Body, the Church, and then sent out into the world to live out our faith through love and forgiveness.

So let us pray as we celebrate today, for the faith of Peter, and the ability to live out that faith as Jesus did, through love and forgiveness.