

5th Sunday, Ord. Time (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
February 6, 7, 2016

On Monday of this past week I drove to New Melleray to go to confession. I have a good priest friend who is a monk there. You certainly don't need to know that, and you may be wondering why I even mention it. I mention it because I think it was my going to confession on Monday that channeled my thinking for today's homily.

In each of today's Scriptures we hear about significant and high-level people in the story of redemption and salvation. In the first Scripture it is the prophet Isaiah; in the middle Scripture it is none other than St. Paul, and in the gospel it is St. Peter. They don't get more significant than these. And in each of the Scriptures we hear how each of these great persons have some incredible experience of God and through the experience are called to ministry on behalf of Jesus and His Father's Kingdom. Mostly everything you and I know about these three great persons is somehow related to how they accepted and carried out the ministry to which they were called.

-If I asked you to tell me what you know about Peter, you would probably tell me what you know about his ministry on behalf of Jesus.

-And if I asked you to tell me what you know about St. Paul, it would no doubt also be what Paul did to spread the word of God and Jesus.

-You might have a more difficult time with Isaiah, and that is understandable.

But too often we miss what happened between the incredible experience of God these individuals had, and what they did in their ministry. What lies in between the experience of God these individuals had and their ministry is that these people had some kind of personal conversion.

-the purifying of Isaiah's tongue is nothing less than a conversion experience

-we all know the conversion experience that St. Paul had while on the road to Damascus

-and Peter's conversion in today's gospel account is equally clear:

"Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

None of us here has any way of really knowing how difficult it may have been for Peter to say those words, but I think we all know that it is quite difficult for us to say them. As I thought about this myself during the preparation of this homily, I became aware of how much easier it is for me to say, "Bless me Father, I have sinned" than to say "Bless me, Father, I am a sinful man." Yet it is the later attitude that I must eventually get to if I am to be really changed and not only changed, but if I am to be really set free.

I spent some time thinking about why it is so difficult to say those words, and again reviewing in my mind some of the things that Jon Leonetti said during the Parish Mission. I even went back to view the section on confession, the Sacrament of

Reconciliation, from the 3rd night's presentation. What struck me is how the phrase "Forget about me..." which Jon used in reference to family and love, seems to apply also to Reconciliation. At least part of the reason why the phrase 'I am a sinful man' is difficult for me to say is because I am too centered on myself rather than centered on God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation certainly involves me:

- I examine MY conscience;
- I confess MY sins, and
- I am asked to be sorry.

All this withstanding, the primary focus of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the mercy of God. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is really not about me and my stuff; it is about God and God's stuff, namely God's mercy.

Before any of us will really hear the Lord's call to us, before any of us will really be able to respond to such a call and become engaged in the ministry of Jesus, we need to experience the step that is between those two: the incredible experience of God and becoming engaged in the work of God. And that step is being able to acknowledge that we are 'a sinful man', 'a sinful woman'. We need to get beyond the generic, the one size fits all. Because in terms of God, one size really doesn't fit all.

- God's love for me is particular ... it is the exact love I depend on to live a dignified life.
- God's mercy for me is also particular ... it is the mercy I need for the sins that I carry.

God holds out a very particular and special love for me and a very particular and special mercy for me. Why would I deny myself of this? But, as Jon Leonetti said, before I can share in this, I must 'forget about myself'.

I have probably mentioned in passing even more than a few times that it would be good if people celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation more often than they do. Today I am moving beyond mentioning it, or suggesting it; today I am asking that you do so. If it has been 30 years, it will take a bit of inertia to step up and receive the Sacrament. But Lent is a perfect time to do this. And make your confession specific. Get beyond missing prayers; get beyond "I think I could be more patient". What are the specific sins that make you say with Peter "*Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful man.*" What are the specific sins that make you say with Peter "*Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful woman.*" And always keep in mind that those who have sinned greatly are also those who are loved greatly by God.

Lent begins this week. We have 40 days during which to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, 40 days during which we can get to confession. I am convinced that after you do, you will wonder why it took you so long to step up. The truth is that none of us will know the fullness of God's Kingdom and power and glory until we do.

Check out Jon Leonetti's third session fast forward into his talk about 45 minutes, and give it a listen about confession.