

Three Gifts

John 14:19-29

May 9, 2010

I.

Like all Sundays, we praise God today and thank him for the blessings we have received through his love, grace, and mercy. It's also Mother's Day, a special time when we honor those wonderful women through whom God's gift of our lives became evident in the world. And we can look at Mother's Day from the perspective of both children and mothers.

A child's viewpoint might be characterized by the story of a teenage boy who came into the house totally famished, a familiar condition with teenage boys, and found his mother in bed not feeling well. He said, "Don't worry about dinner, Mom, I'll carry you down to the stove."

And from a mother's perspective, there probably were times when some moms felt like the woman who was asked if she still would have children if she had it to do all over again. "Of course," she replied, "just not the same ones."

But in all seriousness, we offer thanksgiving and appreciation to our mothers. We remember the blessings they gave and the sacrifices they made, even when they were weary, overworked, and tired. And we know that they love us and never would replace us with anyone else.

And the idea behind Mother's Day leads into today's Gospel reading. Just as our mothers gave us worldly life, we will see that Jesus does the same in a spiritual sense.

II.

But before we actually get into what Jesus meant when he told the disciples why they should live according to his teachings, it could be helpful to understand the setting in which he said it.

Today's reading occurred at the end of the Last Supper, after Jesus shared the Eucharist, after he washed the disciples' feet, and after Judas left the room for the ultimate betrayal. It's a small section of Jesus' lengthy "Farewell Discourse" to his disciples that takes up four chapters of John's Gospel. If you have a red letter Bible, that's about the only color you see when you read that part.

And if the reading had been two verses longer, we would have heard Jesus say, "rise, let us be on our way," as he left the upper room to enter the Garden of Gethsemane and later be arrested.

But today's reading is not out of sequence. It does not look back to Jesus' death and resurrection, which marked our services of Good Friday and Easter. Instead it looks forward to his ascension, which is observed next Thursday, and then to our celebration of Pentecost in two weeks.

That's because Jesus was reassuring his disciples about their future. He was preparing them for life after he was gone, and he offered a vision of the future shaped by God's promises. He called them to live lives based not on his absence, but rather on God's presence.

So today's Gospel is part of Jesus' final words to his disciples. It is from his last will and testament to the men and women who had followed him from the hills and shores of Galilee on his remarkable journey that was about to end on a stark and dismal hill outside of Jerusalem.

III.

And that last will and testament contained three wonderful heavenly gifts given first to the apostles, and then to all humanity. The first gift consists of Jesus' instructions to keep his word and his promise of blessings to those who do so. The second was his revelation of the

means to carry out those instructions through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And the third was his assurance, by leaving his peace behind, that those who were obedient would never be separated from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ. Let's briefly look at them in order.

Jesus began by telling us that company is coming. Visitors are on the way. We can have some new roommates. Jesus said, "those who love me will keep my word, and the Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them."

Finally, is the mystery solved? After all of the preaching you have ever heard, is this the answer? Is it as simple as "love me and keep my word, and we will come and live with you and be part of your life." A sermon on that wonderful possibility could almost deliver itself.

And in a world of theological uncertainties and complexities, in a time of division and controversy within the church, don't we want some clear answers, some central principles that are at the heart of it all?

Today's Gospel gives the formula. "Love me and keep my word" equals "we will come and live with you and be part of your life." If the people do "X," God will do "Y." X equals Y. That seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

Maybe. Maybe not. As often is the case with Jesus' teachings, simple answers are not so simple as we put them into practice. When we look at the world, and at society, and even at the church, we see that this Gospel concept is not always a guiding principle in contemporary life.

And the problem seems to be with the first part of the formula. The difficulty is with "X," loving Jesus and keeping his commandments. The part about "Y," God coming to live with us and being part of our lives, is trustworthy and reliable.

But how does that work? How do we love Jesus and keep his commandments? Do we scrunch up our eyes, clench our fists, grit our teeth, and just force all of that love to come out of us? Is following his teachings and commandments simply a matter of will power?

No, it doesn't happen that way. At least, not entirely. But we do know that the Christian life sometimes seems not to be easy or natural. In many ways humanity is in rebellion against God. And on occasion we do find that we have to make an effort in order to overcome our worldly tendencies if we are to follow the path that Christ has laid out for us.

And being on that path means more than just having some abstract feeling of good will toward Jesus. He wants us to carry out those feelings in our lives. It means actually doing the things he taught us to do in the commandments he spoke of in today's reading.

Those commandments are found throughout the Gospels. They are somewhat different from the Old Testament Ten Commandments that can be measured with some degree of certainty. We probably know, in our own minds, how we measure up against the Ten Commandments. Jesus' commandments, however, deal with attitudes of the heart rather than requirements of the law.

You have heard many of them before. Love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Love your neighbors as yourselves. Do not store up treasures on earth. Forgive others as God forgives you. Do not judge others. Remember him as we celebrate the Eucharist. Remove the log in your own eye before you worry about the speck in someone else's. These are a few examples.

IV.

And because of the spiritual nature of the commandments Jesus gave, we know we cannot always follow them on our own. It is beyond our capabilities. We cannot be obedient in our own strength. This leads to the second gift Jesus mentioned in today's reading, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said the Father would send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to teach the disciples and remind them of all that he said. And since everything that Jesus ever said reflected the will of the Father, we therefore can look to the Spirit to guide us in discerning God's will for us in our lives.

This is because God's revelation continues. When Jesus was alive he was the revelation of God to the people of the time. But was that revelation to end when Jesus left? Were the people alive when Jesus lived the only ones who would actually experience this revelation of God?

We know now that is not the case. The Holy Spirit came to continue to reveal God to us. The love of God made known two thousand years ago in Jesus Christ is made known to us today through the Holy Spirit.

And so the Spirit not only preserved and gives life to Jesus' teachings until his coming again, but also is the source of new revelations in the name of the risen Lord as they might apply to new and evolving situations. Thus, the Spirit reinforces Scripture, and offers guidance to us today in ways that always are in continuity with Jesus' life and message.

V.

And Jesus' life and message is the foundation of the third gift in today's reading. Jesus told the disciples he would leave them, and therefore us, with his peace. And he emphasized that his peace was not the world's peace. What does this mean?

The world's peace is comfort in worldly things. The world's peace is gratification and fulfillment resulting from our accomplishments, our possessions, and our struggles to get ahead. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that kind of peace as long as it is kept in perspective, but it was not what Jesus meant.

Jesus' peace is different. It is not about comfort in our homes or the avoidance of difficulties in life, but rather about confidence in God and the acceptance of God's love.

The peace Jesus left was reconciliation with God, something the world never could give. His peace was not merely a good wish, or a cordial departing observation to have a nice day. He left an inward tangible peace that can be felt and experienced, not merely observed. It is a peace unrelated to the world that comes from Jesus' union with the Father. And we are invited to share in that union so that God's love always will be present in our lives.

VI.

And so even though the setting of today's Gospel foreshadowed Jesus' death on the cross and its meaning for the next life, Jesus' words constituted his final bequest for meaning in this life. He gave guidance and hope to the disciples, and that guidance and hope continues for us.

He called us to love him and to keep his commandments, even though at times our human natures get in the way. And when we do that he will make his home with us in our hearts.

And he then explained how the Father would send the Holy Spirit to sustain us and strengthen us as we falter. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can be lifted up to do God's will and realize the promises of our faith.

And as those gifts become real in our lives, and as we love Jesus and keep his word, God will dwell within us and transform us into the people we are meant to be. We will know his peace.

I know that we try to do our best to live into that promise, and I pray that through the Spirit we can continue to receive God's blessings. *Amen.*