

May 17, 2020

I've you've been watching these livestream Masses regularly, you already know that these days of shelter-at-home and social isolation have been a period of self-examination for me. I know from many of the comments that people have sent me that I'm not alone in that and that many of you have found my reflections useful on our shared journey through the world of COVID-19. This kind of self-examination is not easy for me and I know the same is true for many of you. What's particularly challenging is that there always seems to be more self-examining to do and that "more" is often more uncomfortable and challenging—requiring deeper levels of honesty with myself, God and others than I ever thought I'd be capable of, much less comfortable with.

If you haven't guessed already, something in today's readings has led me to that deeper self-examination. It's part of what Saint Peter (whom I took as my confirmation patron in 1973, by the way) says in his letter:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.
Always be ready to give an explanation
to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope,
but do it with gentleness and reverence,
keeping your conscience clear,...

I think I've done a pretty good job most of the time with the part about sanctifying Christ in my heart. In the sense that I recognize his holiness and what he has done for me and us in his sacrifice on the cross. The trouble with this quote is that Peter doesn't restrict it to "in your hearts". He challenges us to bring that sanctification of Christ our into our dealings with others. And specifically when it come to that fundamental Christian virtue of hope.

Hope, along with faith and love or charity are the cardinal Christian virtues. They are those elements of our faith that should direct all our relationships: with ourselves, with others and with God. Hebrews 11 tells us that faith is confidence in the things we hope for and Romans 8 tells us that we hope for what is cannot see, not for what we can see already. So, we walk in hope: Hope for the future Kingdom of God but also, today especially, hope for an end to our current uncertainty, anxiety and fear.

The reason for our hope is our faith in God who sent his Son to save us, in spite of our unworthiness and imperfection. Our faith in Jesus who sacrificed himself on the cross as the ultimate expression of God's unconditional love for every human being that God has brought to birth. Our faith in the eternal and inexhaustible mercy of our God who forgives us for our failures and who protects us from the full consequences of our poor choices in this life—whether we make those choices out of foolishness, fear, arrogance, pride, or self-centeredness. I find I need to live in that hope now more than almost any other time in my life. The challenge I face isn't so much holding onto that hope, but letting that hope shine through my words and actions the way Peter says I should: with gentleness and reverence.

I don't think it's any coincidence that Peter puts these two terms together. They are intimately linked with each other. They are both expressions of how Jesus treated people in his life: He treated even the most difficult people he encountered with gentleness and reverence— Just think about how he treated Peter after he denied him three times, or how gentle he was after the resurrection with the disciples who abandoned him because of their own fear. Think about the reverence he showed for the fundamental human dignity of sinners, lepers, and outcasts. That reverence and gentleness was and is based on the fact

that Jesus saw and sees each of God's children as having the fundamental dignity and worth of a human being created in the image and likeness of God.

The challenge that I face is with consistently showing that same reverence and gentleness. Even as I look back over the last week I remember times when I failed miserably in that regard. Even though I know what my "triggers" are, I still fall into the trap over and over again. One of the biggest triggers for me is frustration: Just ask the people I work with here at the parish—they could give you multiple examples from just the last seven days! You'd get even more if you talked to my personal friends.

The challenge for me in regard to treating others with gentleness and reverence is two-fold. The first part is working on changing myself—I can't simply accept that when I get frustrated, for example, it's OK to treat others irreverently or un-gently (if there's even such a word). That's kind of like saying, "That's the way I am, so just deal with it!" On the other hand, I've also found that the more obsessed I become with it the more likely I am to really start beating myself up over it and to stop treating myself with gentleness and reverence.

Changing myself—changing ourselves—to treat others with reverence and gentleness requires traveling a middle way between these two extremes. I think we need to hold ourselves accountable, to work on changing ourselves, and do so in a way that remembers that we are all "work in progress" and that God's grace makes up for what's lacking in our human capacities—when we commit ourselves to making the kinds of change that God wants to see in us.

Holding myself accountable, as a good friend reminded me this past week, usually begins with recognizing when I acted like a jerk, owning it, and apologizing for it. For me it also means learning from my bad

behavior—figuring out why I acted the way I did, what the trigger was, what I was feeling and thinking—and renewing my personal commitment to doing everything I can not to repeat it.

That second part is what we Catholics often call “a firm purpose of amendment”. It’s not something that’s limited to sacramental confession—it’s something I (and we) should be practicing constantly in our lives. In this case, the commitment is to changing our future behavior so that we begin to treat others with reverence and gentleness on a more consistent basis.

I firmly believe that by being completely honest—sometimes brutally, and almost always uncomfortably honest—with myself when I fail to treat others as I should, I’m taking the first step on that road of amendment. I know it’s a step I’m going to have to repeat over and over again; a step that will need to be repeated in many different situations with different people—parishioners, staff, fellow clergy, friends, family, or people I only meet once. But if I’m not honest with myself, I can’t begin that process of change. And I believe that the same thing is true for all of us.

So today I invite you to join me in this process in a specific way. There are four steps in challenge you to take:

1. Identify the last time that you failed to treat another person with gentleness and reverence. It could be a spouse who said the wrong thing at the wrong moment, a family member who won’t take the really good advice you’re giving, a friend who didn’t return a call or text quickly enough, a coworker who can’t remember to mute themselves on zoom, or that customer service representative who couldn’t seem to understand what you were trying to tell them.

2. Identify what the trigger was. What was going on inside yourself that caused you to treat that person with less gentleness and reverence that they deserved? What were your thoughts and feelings in that moment?
3. Identify what you need to change inside yourself—in your thoughts, your feelings, your attitudes—to reduce how often this happens in the future.
4. Make a firm purpose of amendment—a commitment to change your behavior with God’s help. This could be in the form of a written statement, or a written prayer, or (if the person you treated this way is someone you live with or interact with regularly) even a verbal promise to that person. Whatever you do, I’ve found it’s best to not just make that commitment inside your own head—there should be some kind of external “record” of it.

After I finish writing this homily, I’m going to take those four steps with three specific situations this past week where I failed to treat another person with the gentleness and reverence they deserve. To help me in that process, I’ve put together—you guessed it—a worksheet that will be posted on our Facebook page with this homily. Please use it if you think it will be useful to you.

Saint Peter reminds us of the importance of our Christian hope: Our hope in eternal life after this life, but also our hope for a better human life after the trials of things like the current pandemic. He also reminds us that we need to “externalize” that hope in our words and actions; in the way we speak to and treat each other. He challenges us do so by treating one another with gentleness and reverence. If you’re like me, that’s a huge challenge that asks me to go places that my imperfect human nature would definitely prefer not to go, but where I know I must go if I’m to be the person I am called to be.

Today, I invite you to join me in being people who better live out and communicate to ourselves and others that fundamental Christian virtue of hope. And to do so first and foremost by recommitting ourselves to treating one another with the gentleness and reverence that each of us deserves as human being created in the image and likeness of our God of unconditional love.