

Homily for Sunday, May 1, 2022 – Third Sunday of Easter

All three Scripture readings deal with something Catholics in particular, and Christians in general, have struggled with—this whole idea of *worthiness* versus *unworthiness*. And much of



it has implications for the way of come to Lord's Table. If you're like me, you feel good about working hard and saying to yourself, "I deserve this thing, because I've worked hard for it." The flip side of the coin is, "I don't deserve this thing, because I don't feel I've done enough to earn it." Let's see if this Scripture theme has something to teach us.

In the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, the Roman officials have arrested the Apostles, for the second time, and warned them, for a second time, not to teach in Jesus' name. Although they have suffered, the Apostles told the Romans, quite clearly, "***We must obey God rather than human beings.***" When the Romans released them from custody, with a harsh warning I might add, it says the ***Apostles rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of Jesus' name.*** They were not looking to become martyrs; they simply felt worthy of suffering in imitation of Jesus who was willing to suffer for them and for the sake of the world.

It reminds me of one of the world's greatest anthropologists, the late Joseph Campbell. As a little Catholic boy growing up on New York City, Joseph would go on his own to the Museum of Natural History and look at all kinds of artifacts, like totem poles, that were hundreds and thousands of years old. He was interested in such things but even more interested in the people who made them and why they made them. In one of his books, Joseph Campbell speaks about an Iroquois warrior in eastern Canada who was captured by an enemy tribe. It was a custom to torture a male captive. The idea was to suffer without flinching as a test to his manhood. The Jesuit priests thought this was appalling, brutal and barbaric. However, the young captive endured this horrible ordeal with singing and rejoicing as if he was coming to celebrate his own wedding day. The young Iroquois brave felt worthy to suffer in such a way. He saw his suffering as a call, as if he had been found worthy and chosen to give his life for his tribe. Ironically, the Jesuit priests celebrated Mass every day and didn't make the connection with Jesus and his sacrifice. Joseph Campbell goes on to speak about the fact that as Jesus leaves the Upper Room--where he celebrated his last meal with his Apostles before his own death--he sings psalms on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane. If I knew that I would be tortured and killed tomorrow, I doubt I would be singing psalms.

In the same vein, when the Native North Americans would kill an animal, they thanked not only the Creator but also the animal itself. They believed the animal itself felt worthy and honoured to be chosen to give its life in order that others may have life. And here we thought Native spirituality was nothing but paganism and we had something to teach them!

The second reading, from the Book of Revelation, continues this theme of worthiness and unworthiness. We heard: ***“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered...”*** Imagine, the one giving life, and not taking life, is considered worthy.

Then we get to the resurrection story in today’s gospel where the Apostles have no luck whatsoever in catching fish. But once they recognize the Risen Lord in their midst, they are immersed into a world of abundance. There’s a funny line that says once Peter recognized the Risen Lord, ***he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea*** and swam to shore where Jesus was cooking breakfast. I’m no Scripture scholar, but I don’t think fishing naked had anything to do with the fact they had run out of worms! The only other people naked, that I’m aware of, were Adam and Eve in the creation story. After they had disobeyed God and sinned, they felt unworthy and so they scrambled to find clothes to cover their shame. Fig leaves were all the rage back then. When you don’t feel worthy, you tend to feel ashamed, and in your shame you scramble to cover up. To this day, we still try to hide our shame, our unworthiness. Peter, after abandoning Jesus, when Jesus needed him most, must have felt ashamed and unworthy of Jesus’ friendship, loyalty, and love. As if he wasn’t exposed enough fishing naked, Peter probably felt that Jesus would expose him, all the more, as a fraud and a coward. In the eyes of Peter and in most of our eyes, Peter clearly seems to be unworthy to be the leader of the pack. But that is not how Jesus sees people, nor is it the way Jesus see us.

God is not interested in our worthiness but in our willingness. There is the urgency of a Kingdom to be proclaimed, there are fish to be caught, there are lambs to be fed, and there are sheep to be tended. Despite your sense of unworthiness, Peter, are you willing to do these things? Do you love me, Peter, enough to start again? From time to time, we have all questioned our faith in God, but rarely have we pondered God’s faith in us. By asking Peter—and by extension us—to feed his lamb, Jesus is instilling faith in Peter. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “I’m not interested in your worthiness game; I’m interested in starting anew with you just as you are. Are you ready for the great adventure of following me?”

To be willing to follow Jesus first implies that you are chosen. God is always choosing people. God is not choosing people for a role or a task, although it might seem that way. God is choosing people to be reflections, icons you might say, of God’s very self in the world. Being chosen doesn’t mean you’re better than others, or that God likes you more than others, or that you are more worthy than others. The people God chooses are, in fact, quite flawed or at least ordinary people, so it is clear their power is not their own. As St. Paul says, ***“If anyone wants to boast, they can only boast in the Lord.”*** God chooses you so that you can communicate to others that they, too, have been chosen. This often takes people a long time to learn. We would rather be

“worthy” than chosen, strange as that may seem. We, seemingly, prefer worthiness contests over accepting God’s grace freely. I want something that I can say I earned through my own work and efforts. But the truth is: totally free gifts are not about me. When it’s about me, I’m back into the worthiness contest feeling like a saint for having earned salvation and feeling like the worst sinner when I haven’t. Either way, I’ve eliminated God and God’s grace from the equation. I’m back to my successes and my failures.

None of us can earn worthiness, because we’ve already got it. It was given to us before we could do anything to deserve it, and it cannot be taken away from us even when we convince ourselves we don’t deserve it.

Before we receive communion, we will say, “Lord, I am not worthy.” It’s both absolutely true on one level and absolutely false on another. We are worthy to receive the Lord, but it has nothing to do with us. It has nothing to do with an earned worthiness. It has nothing to do with the fact that you go to Mass regularly, frequent the Sacrament of Confession, pray the Rosary daily, or believe in the infallibility of the Pope. None of that makes you worthy. It is God alone, from the moment of your conception, who has deemed you worthy. At first, being chosen, being worthy feels like exclusivity, but finally it’s for the sake of inclusivity. Our job as chosen and worthy in the Lord is to remind everyone else that they are also chosen and worthy in the same Lord.

Fr. Phil