

Remember who you are

Homily for Easter III

Acts 5:27–32, 40b–41

Psalm 30:2, 4–6, 11–13

Revelation 5:11–14

John 21:1–19

In his book, *Remember Who You Are*, William H. Willimon of Duke University says that he recalls one thing his mother always told him whenever he left the house to go on a date during his high school days. As he left the house, she would stand at the front door and call after him, "Will, don't forget who you are."

We know what Mom Willimon meant, don't we? She didn't think Wil was in danger of forgetting his name and street address. But she knew that, alone on a date, or in the midst of some party, or while joined by friends, he might forget who he was. She knew that sometimes all of us are tempted to answer to some alien name and to be who we are not. "Don't forget who you are," was the maternal benediction.

Simon Peter would have understood clearly what Mom Willimon meant. There he was by that fire on the night of Jesus' arrest, pressured by the crowd that had gathered around him. Simon Peter, the one who just hours before had said to Jesus, "Don't worry Jesus I won't forget who I am and I sure won't forget who you are". But as we know he did just that. He gave into the temptation to answer to an alien name.

We can sympathize with Simon Peter, can't we?

Think of all he had experienced in one evening. There was the intensity of the Last Supper and all Jesus taught them. His failure in not keeping vigil because he was unable to stay awake for one hour while Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Then there was the shock and horror of seeing Judas' betrayal of the Master. The violence of the arrest, when Simon Peter, in defending Jesus, cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest. Then there was all that confusion as the Temple guards converged on Jesus and took him into custody. After that, St. Mark tersely and matter-of-factly states that Simon Peter and the others

Deserted Jesus and fled.

When we live in a world like this, it can be so hard to remember who we are as Catholic Christians. Have you ever had one of those kind of Simon Peter moments? Perhaps it is in the context of University where the climate is one that is often so hostile to Catholicism, especially in subjects like philosophy. Like Simon Peter, you feel that people, including the prof, and maybe especially the prof, are hounding you. It is so much easier to answer to an alien name than to put up with the relentless pressure. You choose to be silent or even deny your name is Christian.

Or it might be that you are so burdened with the pressures of daily responsibilities that you feel overwhelmed by just trying to make it through the day. God seems as remote to you as the possibility of the Calgary Flames winning the Stanley Cup in my life time.

Perhaps you are saddened because your adult children have forgotten who they are. They have willfully and intentionally rejected the Catholic Faith or they have just drifted away becoming consumed by a material world that gives little attention to things of the Spirit and eternity.

Yes, these and many other experiences can lead us to answer to an alien name resulting in our forgetting who we are.

And yet, there is more to the Simon Peter story isn't there? And there is more to your story and mine. The one who on the night of the arrest three times denied Jesus, some two months later is able to say the words we heard read from the Acts of the Apostles. Now, he is not just talking to some people around a fire at night. No, now he is in the company of the very people who had conspired and plotted to kill Jesus. Listen to how he responds to them when the high priest had demanded the Apostles speak no more about Jesus:

We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

What a 180 degree change. Here is a man with such boldness, such conviction that he twice says we must obey God. How did this happen? How in the course of 60 or so days did Simon Peter change so drastically? How did he remember who he was and answer to his true name? The answer to this question is found in today's Gospel reading. Jesus after breakfast on the shore with seven of the original Twelve then took Simon Peter aside and said in effect: "Simon son of John remember who you are and remember who I have called you to be."

In their interaction, three times Jesus uses Simon Peter's birth name, Simon son of John. Why does he use this name and not Peter? John the Evangelist uses the compound name Simon Peter at the beginning and Peter at the end of this recorded interaction, but not Jesus. Why is this? I would suggest it is because Jesus wants Simon to understand his true humanity and his human frailty. Notice please this is the way that Jesus operates. He chooses the weak and the lowly, and He works His art with broken instruments, who have names like Simon Peter.

Now let me unpack this some more showing just how beautifully Jesus works his art through broken instruments. The words used for "love" in this passage are instructive.

When Jesus asks Simon the first two times if he loves him, the word Jesus uses is a form of ***agape***. This is the whole hearted sacrificial love of Jesus on the Cross. However the word Simon responds with is not the word ***agape*** but the word ***philio***, which means friend. On the third asking Jesus does not use the word ***agape***. Instead he employs the word Simon uses and says in effect "Simon are you my friend"?

Scott Hahn in commenting on this observes:

An intended distinction between these terms would indicate that Jesus, desirous of a complete and heroic love from Peter, was willing by the end of the conversation to settle for his friendship.¹

But such friendship would deepen so that in the end Simon Peter would offer his complete and heroic love, as Jesus then prophesied:

When you were young you dressed yourself and went wherever you wished, but when you get old you'll have to stretch out your hands while someone else dresses you and takes you where you don't want to go." He said this to hint at the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. And then he commanded, "Follow me."

Simon Son of John will by the end of his life love Jesus with agape love. He will give his life for Jesus and as tradition has it was crucified upside down. He was someone whose birth name Simon Son of John always reminded him, that like us, he was a frail human being. It reminded him that Jesus chooses the weak and the lowly, and He works His art with broken instruments, like Simon Peter, like you and like me.

May this meditation of Simon Peter's life be for us an inspiration, so that like him we can hear Jesus address us with his tender voice, as we gather around the meal of his body and blood and hear him ask: "Do you love me?" And if we can with Simon we can say, "Yes Jesus I am your friend, I don't know if I can yet say I whole heartedly love you", Jesus respects that and can work in your life. He will have your attention so that when you leave Mass you can hear him say: "Remember who you are and don't answer to an alien name. With people like this he can work his art so that more and more we can say, "Jesus I now desire to love you with a complete and heroic love so that I will lay down my life for you."

¹ Mitch, C. (2010). Introduction to the Gospels. In *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (p. 201). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.