

## 8th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Cycle B)

March 2, 2003 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

### INTRODUCTION

There's an old story – probably you've heard it – about the wife who was preparing to bake a ham for dinner. She took up various knives and saws and other implements of destruction and set about cutting the end off the ham. Her husband noticed her doing this, and asked her why she was cutting the end of the ham off. She said,

“Well, that's the way my mother always did it. I learned to cook by watching her. I really don't know the reason.”

They talked about this for a little while and were really puzzled as to just what the reason might be. So they called up her mother and asked her. She said,

“Well, that's the way my mother always did it. I learned to cook by watching her. I really don't know the reason.”

So they called up the grandmother in Florida. Grandma, why did you cut the end off the ham before you baked it?”

“Because my pan was too small to get the whole ham in it.”

### MOVE

I've worked for companies that did things the same way. “Why do we do it that way?” “We've always done it that way.” “But why do we do it that way?” “It's company policy.” “But why do we do it that way?” “There's no reason for it, it's just company policy.”

When I was Director of Security at a small highly selective liberal arts college some years ago, I had a notice posted in the locker room. It was about “winners” vs. “losers.” Part of what it said was

Losers say, "It's the way it's always been done"

Winners say "There's a better way"

Losers learn only not to make mistakes by not trying anything different  
Winners learn from their mistakes

## **MOVE**

If you don't want to make any mistakes, there's a pretty easy way to do that. Just don't do anything. Don't open yourself up to a new way of thinking, to any new possibilities.

But that in itself is a mistake, isn't it?

We can't just turn inward on ourselves. We have a duty to ourselves, and to each other, and to God. And I think part of that duty is to be open to open, honest, unconditional, intimate relationships – ourselves, with each other, and with God.

## **MOVE – Intimacy with ourselves**

I suppose it may sound strange to suggest that we have open and honest relationships with ourselves – but I think a lot of us have a lot of trouble getting to that point. Sometimes it's hard to come face to face with ourselves.

Sometimes I go on a pre-Christmas retreat to the Trappist monastery in Kentucky. There aren't a lot of distractions there – no TV, no radio, no telephones, no video games, no newspapers, no idle talk. Sometimes I don't speak a word to another human being for five days.

I guess some people would be completely insane after five days of that. It does take some getting used to. But I find that it rejuvenates me. If I approach it in the right frame of mind, it forces me to come face to face with myself.

Who is that guy looking back at me in the mirror? Do I really know him? For most of my life, I really didn't. Sometimes I look back now and think, “Who was that guy and what was he doing with my life?”

Sometimes it's good to take a look at that.

I talked to a dentist friend one time. I guess he was having one of those “mid-life” things. He said, “thirty years ago, some 17-year-old kid decided I was going to be a Dentist.” Interesting way to put it.

Plato wrote, "The first and the best victory is to conquer self. To be conquered by self is, of all things, the most shameful and vile." If you want open and honest and loving relationships with others and with God, start with yourself.

### **MOVE – Intimacy with each other**

When we think of intimacy with another person, I suppose most of us think of marriage. Although I wasn't always married, I've come more and more to see marriage as a sort of a model of our relationship with God.

Especially working where I work – the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal – I see quite a few marriages that never achieved true marital intimacy. They never really got to the point of a true spousal relationship without conditions.

First, remember that the “minister” of the Sacrament of Marriage is not the priest or the deacon. He's just there to witness the marriage as a representative of the Church. The couple themselves administer the sacrament to each other. That's an important point, since it sets the stage for what the entire relationship should be.

Most of you have at least heard the words . . . “have you come here freely and without reservations to give yourselves to each other in marriage? Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? . . . to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

That covers some of the “conditions” that do *not* apply to marriage. It's *not* for the rest of our lives unless something better comes along. It's *not* for better, for richer, and in health alone. It's not “as long as our love lasts” or “if we feel like it.” It's a spousal relationship – loving without conditions.

Marriage is a covenant, not a contract. Even most dictionaries are unable to make much of a distinction between covenants and contracts. Here's how it looks to me.

A “contract” has terms which are based on the compliance of both parties. If one party fails to comply, the contract can be voided. But a “covenant” has terms based on promises given *unconditionally*.

In a “contract” marriage, it’s . . . *I will love you if you love me. I will be faithful to you if you are faithful to me. Since you don't love me, I don't love you. Since you haven't been faithful to me, I don't have to be faithful to you. This is my car, this is my money. He is your son. Since you did not fulfill your end of the deal, the deal's off. Our contract is broken. We are released from our contract.*

A “covenant” looks pretty different . . . *I will love you. I will be faithful to you. Even though you don't love me, I still love you. Even if you're not faithful, I will remain faithful. This is our money, my step-son is now our son. The duration of our covenant is "until death".*

That’s made easier by forgiveness . . . but that’s for another time.

Another one from that locker room poster is . . .

Losers make promises  
Winners make commitments

### **MOVE – Intimacy with God**

Think about God’s Covenant with the Chosen People – “I will be your God, and you will be My people.”

It’s *not* – “I will be your God, *IF* you will be My people.”

In much the same way, God invites us to a spousal relationship -- loving without conditions.

We often resist this invitation to divine intimacy. It is easier to maintain a businesslike relationship with God – I keep the commandments, God gives me eternal life. I go to church on Sunday and don’t sin (too much), God will let me into Heaven.

It's just not a "contract" like that. It's a "covenant," a spousal relationship with God that calls for us to manifest it in our attitudes and behaviors. Our old attitudes and behaviors just won't hold up under the light of a covenant.

That's what the wineskin thing is about in today's Gospel. In Jesus' time, they would make a bag out of goat skin or sheep skin. They'd fill it with grape juice and seal it up. As the grape juice fermented and became wine, it would produce carbon dioxide and expand. A new wineskin would stretch and expand and hold the wine in until it was ready to be put into jars or whatever they kept it in.

But old wineskins had already stretched and dried out. They couldn't stretch any further. Besides, they would still have some of the spoiled residue from the old wine that would contaminate the new wine.

That's why we have to approach our relationship with God as "new creatures" – we've got to be more flexible, discarding all that dried-up old stuff that prevents us from taking in the precious wine of God's love and friendship. We are invited to provide new wineskins (new attitudes and behaviors). Change attitude and behavior will change

## **CONCLUSION**

Next week, we begin the penitential season of Lent. It's a good time to think about "becoming new wineskins." That's part of what the "Immersed in Christ" series is about. We've heard a little in today's readings about fasting and desert places, but external acts like fasting and praying are not much good unless we are conscious of the meaning of those things. As Father Knight says . . . "We fast to express our hunger for Christ."

"The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire."

-- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

## READINGS

Hos 2:16b, 17b, 21-22

Thus says the LORD:  
I will lead her into the desert  
and speak to her heart.  
She shall respond there as in the days of her youth,  
when she came up from the land of Egypt.  
I will espouse you to me forever:  
I will espouse you in right and in justice,  
in love and in mercy;  
I will espouse you in fidelity,  
and you shall know the LORD.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

**R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.**

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.

**R. The Lord is kind and merciful.**

He pardons all your iniquities,  
he heals all your ills.  
He redeems your life from destruction,  
he crowns you with kindness and compassion.

**R. The Lord is kind and merciful.**

Merciful and gracious is the LORD,  
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.  
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,  
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.

**R. The Lord is kind and merciful.**

As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he put our transgressions from us.  
As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

**R. The Lord is kind and merciful.**

### **Reading II**

2 Cor 3:1b-6

Brothers and sisters:  
Do we need, as some do,  
letters of recommendation to you or from you?

You are our letter, written on our hearts,  
known and read by all,  
shown to be a letter of Christ ministered by us,  
written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God,  
not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.

Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.  
Not that of ourselves we are qualified  
to take credit for anything as coming from us;  
rather, our qualification comes from God,  
who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant,  
not of letter but of spirit;  
for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.

## **Gospel**

Mk 2:18-22

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast.  
People came to him and objected,  
"Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast,  
but your disciples do not fast?"  
Jesus answered them,  
"Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?  
As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.  
But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them,  
and then they will fast on that day.  
No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak.  
If he does, its fullness pulls away,  
the new from the old, and the tear gets worse.  
Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins.  
Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins,  
and both the wine and the skins are ruined.  
Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."