

## Children

Good morning, boys and girls. Has anybody been to the beach this year or to a swimming pool? Everyone who has been somewhere where there is water to swim in should hold up his hand. Almost everybody. Now this is the big question. How many of you know how to swim? How many of you can go through the water without putting your feet down to touch the bottom? Some of you can, and some of you can't. I know that when I go to the beach or the pool I see two kinds of people. There are the ones who can swim and the ones who cannot swim. I can always tell the difference between the two.

Let me show you what I mean. Some people who cannot swim come to the beach with chairs and blankets, some suntan lotion, sunglasses, a radio, and maybe a football. That is one kind of person who comes to the beach. Then there is another kind of person. He brings suntan lotion and a blanket, but he also has flippers, a raft, and an underwater mask. Now which person do you think comes to swim and which person to sit on the beach? You guessed, the one with the mask and flippers has come to swim.

If you can't swim, you feel afraid of the water and you sit on the land. Once in a while you may wade a little or sit down in the shallow part, but you can't go out in the water that is over your head unless you know how to swim. Being able to swim makes you another kind of person.

The same thing is true about the person who loves God and is a servant of God. People who do not know God and follow him are afraid of living life the way God meant it. Trusting that God is going to give you eternal life allows you to go all the way in life. The person who swims can go anywhere. He can walk on land, or swim in water, but the person who cannot swim must always stick close to shore. The same thing is true with people who believe in God. You who trust in God are not worried about when you will die, because you know that God has an even better life waiting for you after you die. Christians are like people who go to the beach with flippers and masks. They are able to swim in life and are not afraid of anything...

If you can't swim, then learn how and learn well so that you can enjoy the beach more. If you know anyone who is not a Christian, then tell him about Jesus so that he can love life more and not be afraid. That is what being a Christian is all about on earth. It is living and not being afraid and knowing that God has an even better life planned for you in heaven.

I

In January 1985, a large suitcase was discovered at the customs office of the Los Angeles International Airport. Inside the suitcase was the dead body of an unidentified young woman. U.S. Customs agents who discovered the body immediately launched an investigation. What they uncovered was a tale of a horrible tragedy that resulted from the desperate desire of two young people for freedom. The dead woman was the wife of a young Iranian living in the U.S. Her desire was to join her husband. However she was

unable to obtain a visa. So, she took matters into her own hands. She squeezed herself into a large suitcase and had it smuggled onto a jet headed for the United States. It was a foolish endeavor. Even if she had survived the journey in the cargo bay of the jet, she would have remained an illegal alien spending the rest of her life looking over her shoulder fearing discovery. And so she died a lonely death squeezed into a tiny space in the cargo hold of an airplane. (1)

As we prepare to celebrate our nation's birth, it would be good for us to ponder what American citizenship has meant to many people over the past two hundred years, and what it means to many who seek to enter our land today. People, including many of our own ancestors, have gone to extraordinary lengths to make America their home. **What is it about this land that has made it so attractive to the rest of the world?**

Doubtless many people come here looking for work. They are tired of eking out a subsistence living in their own land. They know that this is truly a land of economic opportunity. Most of them come here and work hard and become an asset to their community and to our country.

Others live in lands torn with crime or outright oppression by their own government. They come here looking for security. It's interesting in a sad way. As Pope Francis has noted there are more Christian martyrs in the past 100 years than in the first centuries. Yesterday was the feast day of 46 Ukrainian Catholic priests and nuns who were killed by the Communists because they did not renounce the Catholic Church. Few people die in traditional warfare nowadays, that is, war between nations. Most people who die today from violence are killed either in crimes or they are the victims of terrorism or they are victims of violence from their own governments. There are still some very cruel authoritarian governments in many parts of the world.

So people come to America as they have for 200 years for economic opportunity or to flee crime or persecution in their own countries. Who can blame either group?

Particularly if you have a family, you will go to extraordinary lengths to provide them with a better life.

But there is another reason people have risked their very lives to come to this land. And it's summed up in one word: Freedom. Blessed freedom. That's what America has stood for more than anything else since its founding two hundred years ago. It was founded by a group of individuals who had an amazing vision of a better way of structuring government--of the people, for the people, by the people. Freedom. What a powerful word. What an amazing idea. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom to pursue one's dreams--we dare not take these things for granted. And so in two days, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, we will enjoy picnics and parades and fireworks to celebrate, as generations have before us, the gift of freedom.

For Christians, however, every worship service ought to be a celebration of freedom--for the most important freedom available in this world is the freedom that only Christ can bring--freedom from sin and death, freedom from fear and failure, freedom from anger and vindictiveness.

Perhaps we should replace our Call to Worship with fireworks and our organ with a brass band. Why? Because nearly 1800 years before our ancestors fought at Valley Forge, someone else died for our freedom. On the cross of Calvary a man named Jesus of Nazareth gave up his life to free us from every scourge that would crush our spirits and bring us down to sub-human activity. "You have been set free . . ." writes St. Paul.

Do you know what that means?

**St. Paul uses the image of slavery.** Paul lived in a world where slavery was practiced on a widespread basis. Some people were enslaved because of military conquest. Others were enslaved because they could not pay their debts. But the people he was writing to knew the life of a slave to be a miserable one. Imagine living at the mercy of the whims of a master who, if he chose, could be cruel and vindictive--one who could whip you or banish you or even have you killed.

Of course, Paul himself knew what it was to be bound in chains while languishing in prison. You and I may have difficulty relating to slavery. Probably none of us will ever wear chains around our arms and legs. Although I did read an amusing story about one man, an artist named Trevor Corneliusen, 26, who discovered what that's like.

Remember Trevor is an artist. However, that does not mean he's too bright. For you see, he decided one day to paint a portrait of his ankles as they would look bound in chains. Can you see that in your mind's eye--a portrait of his ankles bound in chains? Seeking to make it as realistic as possible, Trevor obtained a heavy chain and a sturdy lock from a local hardware store and proceeded to bind himself as securely as if he were a prisoner. There was only one problem. When he was finished with his portrait, he couldn't find the key to the lock. There was no way to take the chains off.

That wouldn't have been that big of a deal had he been at home. But Trevor was camping in a remote area north of Baker, California--out in the middle of nowhere. It took him 12 hours to hop through the desert and reach a gas station for help. (2)

Brilliant!

You and I will probably never have chains like that on us--unless we're really clueless. But there are many people in our land who live as if they are bound with chains. I'm thinking of those who have become addicted to drugs or alcohol or tobacco or pornography or a host of other vices that have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time.

**A recovering alcoholic will tell you that the first step to overcoming an addiction is to acknowledge that addiction has taken you prisoner.** Addiction can be a terrible master.

Some of you are familiar with the so-called Darwin Awards, given to people who lose their lives doing something incredibly stupid. So often these tragedies are linked to drug or alcohol addiction. For example, in May of 2004 the manager of an apartment house in Austria was surprised to find the legs of a corpse sticking out of a window of one of his apartments. Police entered the apartment and found the deceased man's head soaking in a sink full of hot water.

Apparently, this out-of-work Austrian had returned home after a night of drinking and drugs. He decided to slip in through the kitchen window. The window was fixed at the base and tilted out, giving him just enough room to squeeze his head through as far as the sink before he got stuck. While flailing around trying to escape, he somehow turned on the hot water tap.

Police are not sure why he didn't simply turn off the water or pull the plug to allow the water to escape from the sink. Too high, I suppose. Of course, the real question is why he didn't just enter the apartment through the front door, since police found the keys to his apartment in his pants pocket. But perhaps it's not too surprising. People have been known to do incredibly dumb things under the influence of alcohol and drugs. (3)

As former football coach Lou Holtz once said, "I have never heard a successful man or woman get up and say, 'I owe my success to drugs and alcohol.' Yet I know of thousands of people," Holtz continues, "that have ruined their lives because of drugs and alcohol."

Of course, you can become addicted to a host of activities. I am beginning to wonder if some people are becoming addicted to their smart phones. That's a rather benign addiction, I suppose. However, I understand that, in England, they've decided to try to protect smart phone addicts from themselves. They've begun establishing so-called "Safe Text" streets in London. One feature of these "Safe Text" streets is padded lampposts. You want to guess why the lampposts are padded? That's right, to keep people from running into them while they are texting their friends. (4)

I may seem to be making light of a serious situation. I don't mean to be. It's important to understand that we can be addicted to a great many things. Some addictions can even be beneficial. For example, some people are addicted to exercise, which most of us could use more of.

Psychologist William Glasser wrote a book several years ago titled *Positive Addiction*. In his book, he notes how some people actually improve their lives through developing what he calls addictions to positive endeavors. For example, he believes a person who jogs one mile a day not only strengthens his heart and his lungs, but he increases his self-confidence and imaginative powers as well.

Though he uses language more suited to his time, this is basically what St. Paul is saying. In this passage Paul is saying we can be addicted to sin, which includes everything that would pull us down and keep us from being what God created us to be . . . or we can be addicted to God who will help us, if we will let Him, increase our sense of well-being and give us something wonderful to live for. That is the ultimate addiction--being bound by chains of love to God.

**This is to say that there is no greater freedom in the world than the freedom that God gives through Jesus Christ.** Whether it is freedom from a debilitating habit or freedom to simply be the very best you can be, there is something about being connected to Christ that allows us to experience a richness to life that those without Christ will never experience.

Writer Steve Beard wrote an interesting column about the recent Nobel Prize winner and legendary folk/rock singer Bob Dylan shortly after Dylan was nominated for the Nobel Prize. He noted that, not too long ago *Rolling Stone* magazine asked Bob Dylan what song he wanted to hear on his death bed.

Dylan said, "How 'bout 'Rock of Ages'?" Steve Beard thought it was fascinating that Dylan--the eccentric man that hippies christened as a prophet in the 1960s--still sings songs from his gospel albums.

Maybe we should not be surprised. A few years ago, Dylan was opening many of his concerts with the song "I Am the Man, Thomas."

The song is about the conversation between Jesus Christ and Doubting Thomas. "Look at these nail scars here in my hands/They pierced me in the side, Thomas, I am the Man/They made me bear the cross, Thomas, I am the Man/They laid me in the tomb, Thomas, I am the Man/In three days I arose, Thomas, I am the Man."

Some of you will remember that back in the 1970s Dylan was reportedly converted to Christ. His background is Judaism. But his spiritual path has taken him into an array of

philosophies and religions since then. Could it be, however, that through it all God really has a hold on Dylan and has never completely let him go?

Beard notes that in his recent concerts Dylan had been singing the song "Solid Rock" from his 1980 album *Saved*. In it, Dylan proclaims:

"For me He was chastised, for me He was hated/For me He was rejected by a world that He created . . . Well, I'm hangin' on to a solid rock/Made before the foundation of the world/And I won't let go, and I can't let go, won't let go." (5)

That sounds like to me that way back in the background, in spite of his many experimentations, Dylan really is addicted to Jesus. That can happen to a person. Maybe it's happened to you. Maybe at one time in life you were addicted to one of the many vices in this world that lure people and then trap them. But one day you met Jesus and he took the chains of addiction off and set you free--free to be a new person with a new heart and a new spirit.

Maybe you were bound by a different kind of addiction. Maybe you were bound by self-righteousness and a condemning spirit. Maybe Christ has set free that spirit in you to love and to be loved.

Whatever your situation, there is one who longs to take off any chains, even if it is simply the chains of a meaningless and self-centered preoccupation with your own needs. He wants to help you make a new start. He wants to be your Friend, your Ally as you seek to live an abundant life, filled to the brim with a joy that surpasses understanding.

Today is the day that can happen. Will you join your life to that of Christ? Then you will be able to say that glorious chant that we first heard from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr:

"Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, [I'm] free at last." (6)

Let's thank God for freedom this day, and let's open our hearts to the One who gives us freedom in this world and the world to come. Amen

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1. Jim Davis, <http://focusongod.com/Romans07.html>.

2. *Uncle John's Funniest Ever Bathroom Reader* (Bathroom Readers' Institute).

3. *Kurier* (Austria). Cited in Wendy Northcutt, *The Darwin Awards 4: Intelligent Design* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2006), p. 75.

4. *Daily Mail*, 2008. *Uncle John's Funniest Ever Bathroom Reader* (Uncle John's Bathroom Reader). Portable Press. Kindle Edition.

5. <http://www.breakpoint.org/component/content/article/71-features/1370-unlikely-witnesses>.

6. Dr. King actually said "We're free at last." I took liberties to personalize the message.

Il Fr Joseph Pellegrino

If today were not a Sunday, we would be celebrating the memorial of one of the Church Fathers, St Irenaeus. Irenaeus lived in the second century, about 130 to 203 AD. Among his writing, you will find the statement: *The Glory of God is man fully alive*. Think about that: *The Glory of God is man fully alive*. What does this mean? Let's break it down. Glory is that which radiates from God, that which shows His Holiness. Therefore, the Holiness of God is radiated in man fully alive. To be fully alive is to be

alive both physically and spiritually, for we are spiritual beings as well as physical beings. Many people feel dead because they are dead. They live only for the physical and have sacrificed or refused to embrace their capacity for the spiritual. Man fully alive is more than physically alive. Man fully alive is spiritually alive. Therefore, to paraphrase Irenaeus' *The Glory of God is man fully alive*; we can say "The Holiness of God is seen in the man or woman who is totally, physically and spiritually alive.

It is in this light that we can come to an understanding of those demanding mandates at the beginning of this Sunday's Gospel: Whoever loves Father or Mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Recently, there has been a supposedly humorous commercial on TV that shows a teenage girl getting home at a reasonable time in the evening and her mother, who should have eaten a snickers bar, yelling at her, "What are you doing home? You should be out someplace disappointing your father." The commercial is a joke, but, sadly, there are parents who try to convince their children to engage in actions that would destroy their spiritual lives. If they were to go along with their parents sinful demands, then they would be choosing the love of their parents over the love of God. This is not all that rare. I have come upon parents, few to be sure, but still parents who encourage their children to sin. I have come upon parents who have told their Teenage daughters that they need to be on birth control because it would be reasonable for them to have sex. I have come upon parents who have taught their children to cheat at business, or work. But mostly, sadly, I have come upon parents who have taught their children to hate. They have done this by refusing to control their own anger and hating others. If a child were to choose to follow a parent leading her or him to sin, then that child would be loving Father or Mother more than God. The child would not be worthy of God, at least not until he or she rejects sin.

The second mandate really strikes us as excessive. It sure seems to be over the top to say, "Anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." We hear this mandate, and we think about our children. Our hearts explode with love just picturing them in our minds. How can we be told that if we love them more than we love Jesus, we are not worthy of the Lord. How can this be? It is simply that Jesus Christ must be the center of our lives. We love our children because they are not just our children; they are the Lord's children. Parents are in the business of raising children for the Lord, not for themselves. If parents separate their love for their children from their love for the Lord, if the worship of God is not a priority in their home, if they let their children convince them that the Christian life is too demanding for modern day people, then these parents would be loving their son or daughter more than God. They would be unworthy of being a follower of Christ.

But if parents, or better, when parents, allow the presence of God in their homes to motivate their every action, when parents are committed to raising their children to be the Christian men and women the world craves to find its meaning and worth, then their

love for their children will reflect their love for the Lord. Catholic parents do not love their children more than they love God. Their love for their children is an expression of their love for God.

And finally, "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Christ's love is sacrificial love. He loves by giving. He calls us to love by giving. This can be difficult. This can be a real cross. A person can have a serious illness. There can be deep pain and division within a family, a person may experience a horrible life-changing tragedy. A person might be in so much pain that he or she just wants to give up, even to the point of going to war with God rather than accept his or her situation in life as a participation in the cross of Christ. If we refuse to follow the Lord because we are convinced that our crosses are too much for us, then we are not worthy of being called disciples of the Lord.

There is a popular expression, "If you have your health you have it all." This is not true. What is true is this: "If you have the Lord, you have it all."

And St. Paul wrote: "Do you not realize that when you were baptized you were baptized into the death of Christ, so that you can live the life of Christ." Millions of Christians, billions of Christians, have died happy in the Lord because they have realized with their lives that nothing can ever separate them from the love of Christ. They have been and are fully alive, physically and spiritually. The Glory of God has shown through them. Again, St. Irenaeus, "The Glory of God is man fully alive."

May we also be fully alive.. May we be worthy followers of Jesus Christ

III Fr Desiano

Nothing has shown us the social connections we have, and need, more than this Covid-19 disease. This disease has forced us to fear, to keep afar, and to question every contact we could possibly make with another human being. One of the things most affected by our social confusion is what the scriptures speak about most clearly, hospitality.

How many times did I hear grandparents would not go near their grandchildren, and children would not bring their kids to see their grandparents? "I don't want to be responsible for killing you," people would say, showing just how much ultimate fear had become part of our daily discourse. We cannot begin to imagine a scene such as we have in the first reading, a prophet casually dropping in on a couple to eat until they end up building a bedroom for him to stay in.

Jesus sees hospitality as one of the fundamental ways in which faith is shared. He talks about receiving each other; to the extent that we receive others into relationship in faith, to that extent we receive the one who sent them. Ultimately, it is God who sends us into each other's lives; ultimately when we receive each other in genuine openness and love, we are receiving God.

But, to be honest, Jesus doesn't sound very hospitable with the opening lines of this passage—that unless we love Jesus more than our parents, more than our family, we cannot be his followers. We ask, “Why do we have to face a choice like this?” It gets clearer in the next lines. The one choice we have to make is whether to embrace Jesus and his way. When we do that, we will then know how to love everyone else in him.

It's as if Jesus is saying that when we understand God's infinite love for everyone, then we have the chance to understand how we are to view each other. God's love binds us together, certainly as families, but also as friends and neighbors, also as members of a human community whose meaning becomes clear the more we see God's love for each and all of us.

The passage from Paul's letter shows the same thing from another angle. When we have completely identified with Christ, as we do when we are baptized, then we have died to the selfish, need-based way we usually live. Rather, in our new relationship with Christ, we find the power of his new life in our hearts, freeing us from the narrow vices that keep us from truly seeing each other.

The new life that Jesus offers us calls us to embrace each other as brothers and sisters. It's hard to do this literally at this moment in our history, but maybe it's clearer what this means. We now know how frail we are, how we depend on each other, and how we need to live as one human family—we know this better because of the turmoil of our present life. As Catholics, we gather to worship on behalf of all the human race. As God unifies us in Christ, so God is showing the unity that our very humanity cries out for and needs.

We who, because of our sacraments, know the power of our relationship with Christ, can uphold the importance of relationship, of hospitality, of acceptance in this broken and confused time. We have died with Christ, snuffing out the things that alienate and disunite us. We are invited to a table where God would feed us all as brothers and sisters. We, who have been visited not by a prophet but by the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, bring his transforming love into every relationship of our lives.