

Faith and Works

Homily for the Rite of Election First Sunday of Lent Cycle C 2018

Genesis 9:8-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1: 12-15

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Peace be with you! Welcome to Lent! Welcome to our forty days of fasting and prayer with the Lord! Welcome to the journey of faith that leads us to follow Jesus through death to new life.

That word “faith” is the interpretive key – not just for Lent – but for the entire Christian life. Indeed, it might be wise for all of us to recall the three questions we ask those desire to join the Church at Rite of Acceptance celebrated at each of our parishes communities.

The first question: What is your name? Folks generally know their name. It’s pretty straight forward. The second questions: What is it you ask of God’s Church? The answer: Faith. The third question: What does faith offer you? The answer: Eternal life. Permit me now to open up each of these three components in the Christian life.

First: Your Name. The Christian life does not begin with anything other than you. But this is not simple about who you are now. No. It’s about the person God created you to be. Note well, in our Gospel, Satan tries to turn Jesus away from his vocation and his call. Satan is always concerned about presenting images and mirages from the past – especially our past sins and our present temptations. But God? God is totally the opposite. God does not care about our past. God cares about our future. God wants us to be the very best version of ourselves. He wants us to be the very best person God created us to be.

I read an interview a couple of years ago with Stephan Curry – one of the most celebrate basketball stars. How does he perfect his game? In the interview he talked about “muscle memory.” Literally, after the court is empty, Stephan Curry practices those infamous three-point shots from various points of the court. He does so from a variety of stances and body positions. He explains that he is building “muscle memory” so that under the pressure of the game the muscles of his body “remember” how to work together in order to make the basket no matter at one point he stands on the court.

Friends, this is even more true when it comes to the spiritual life. We always start with who we are – our name – so that God can test us and coach us – even through life temptations – so that we can become the great man and the great woman he has created us to be. God is not only building a kind of “spiritual” muscle memory in us so that we can choose good and avoid evil, but his sacraments provide a steady spiritual diet so that we are constant fed and nourished with his presence – especially the Eucharist. But he starts with us as we are with all of our sins and all of our temptations and all of our brokenness assuring us of his love. He calls each of us by name. Hence the first question: What is your name?

This leads to the second question: What is it you desire of the Church? The answer: Faith. It's wise to remember on this 500th anniversary of Martin Luther, that the scandal of Christian divisions tends to hinge on our understanding of this key word: faith.

"Justification by faith," tended to be an argument growing from the reformation movements centering on the question of whether we are saved by faith or by good works. We now know that when Martin Luther translated the bible into beautiful vernacular German that he was seeing the message of Romans 3 through a screen of a deficient Latin translation. I will spare you the details, but the English word justice and justification, righteous and righteousness all come from the same Greek stem: *dikaiois*

In the context of Romans 3, Martin Luther – when translating the Latin text of St. Paul's thought into German inserted the word "*allein*" or "alone" by stressing what he thought St. Paul was getting at – namely that "faith" alone would "justify" us – not good works. Thus, began the polemic divisions around "faith" bring forth salvation" or "good works" earning us salvation.

Yet subsequent scripture research of the original Greek – research often conducted from Protestant scholars – suggests that the original Greek of St. Paul was trying to catch a much more Jewish understanding of salvation. The core of St. Paul – a rabbi by training – was that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament covenant for both Hebrews and Greeks. Salvation is not so much about an attribute of justification and righteousness we acquire from God. It's about the attribute that God has before all humanity. As a result, salvation is not about how we are saved. It's about who is saved.

The "works" of Romans, then, is not about earning our way into heaven. It's about bringing heaven closer to earth. Note well: For Catholics, the Catechism of the Catholic Church lists the spiritual and corporal works of mercy under the seventh commandment: "Thou shall not steal."

The catechism goes on to cite St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* 2.2.66.7, noting that "according to natural law, goods that are held in superabundance by some people should be used for the maintenance of the poor."

St. Thomas Aquinas then cites St. Basil's own words, "The bread you are holding back for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away from disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy. You are thus guilty of injustice toward as many as you might have aided and did not."

"Thou shalt not steal." Our failure to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbor the shelter the homeless, to comfort the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to bury the dead means we are stealing from the physically poor. Our failure to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, gently correct the sinner, patiently bear wrongs, willing forgive offences, comfort the afflicted and pray for both living and dead means we are stealing from the spiritually poor.

This means that our good works are not so much about how we get included into heaven, but how we include others giving them a taste of our faith by including them through our “good works” here on earth. Faith and good works are not competitive. They are complementary. For the poorest and most marginal in our midst, they are a foretaste of eternal life.

“Eternal life.” That is the answer to question three: “What does faith offer you?” The answer: “Eternal life.”

Far too often when we hear this phrase eternal life, we begin to think about how this life extends into the next life. For all of us, it is hard to picture death. It’s even harder to look at the crucifix so prominently displayed in Catholic worship spaces and image this particular kind of death – death on a cross.

Yet eternal life is not about this life extending into the next. Through the liturgy – especially the Eucharist – it’s about “eternal life” breaking into this life – our daily life. In his book, “Violence Unveiled” noted writer and scholar Gil Bailie suggests that Jesus dies in a bloody big screen production so that you don’t have to live in one. Jesus takes upon himself all of the dysfunction, all of the violence, all of the suffering, all the evil the world has to offer and – by his bodily resurrection – shows that this life does not have the final word.

The problem is not that the death of Jesus was not efficacious. The problem is we act like it never happened. We continue our gang banging and our violence. We continue our warfare and our injustice. We continue to stand by in the face of the hungry, the homeless and the refugees. We allow our silence, our isolation, our distance from our loved ones to go on unchecked. We continue in sin. We cave into our temptations.

Yet allowing the “eternal life” of God into our daily lives means that death – in its many forms – does not have the final word. The final word is “Jesus.” The final word – the third answer – is “eternal life.”

Friends who are about to join the Church: We await your arrival to enjoy this foretaste of eternal life through your reception of the sacraments – especially the Eucharist – and we pray that on the third, fourth and fifth Sunday of Lent our prayers for you will strengthen you for any temptation that awaits you in the desert of daily life.

For all of us present today, I hope we all take this opportunity during these forty days of Lent to ask ourselves the three key questions asked of those during the Rite of Acceptance at the start of their Christian journey: What is your name? What is it you ask of God’s Church? What does faith offer you?” My hope and prayer is that wherever we are on our journey, we see Jesus – anew – who is our way our truth and our life. Peace be with you.