

Live Jesus!

Day of Recollection, September 25, 2010

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GOD IS LOVE AND I AM LOVEABLE

There are two truths to which today's theme points. The first of those truths is that *God is Love*. The second truth is that *I am loveable*. These two truths are intimately related to each other in that it is precisely *because* God is love that I am loveable. The horrendous things that each of you has experienced as victims of abuse may have made the second truth, "I am loveable," something very difficult for you to believe in or to accept or to experience. But you *are* loveable, each of you, because God who is love makes you loveable! My prayer is that you may, in time and through grace, come to believe that truth, to experience that truth and to live each day from that truth!

"The Millstone Orphans"

Matthew 18: 5-6 "And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." (New American Bible)

Mark 9: 42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe [in me] to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." (New American Bible)

Luke 17:-2 Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his

neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.” (New American Bible)

In reflecting on what to say today, I kept thinking of these verses from the New Testament. I went to my bible but could not immediately locate them, so I went on line and put in a few words such as “little one” and “millstone,” and up popped an article entitled, “The Millstone Orphans.” I could not find the name of its author, but I would like to quote a few of its initial paragraphs as I begin my reflections.

But before I do that, I need to clarify something about these sayings of Jesus. What does Jesus mean when he says, “*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin?*” He certainly does NOT mean that the little ones have sinned but that they have **been exposed to sin** by the evildoer. Jesus means that this sin was committed **against** the little ones, not **by** them!

After quoting these three similar versions of the same saying of Jesus, the author begins in this way.

“This message could have been called "The Soul Stealers" if the focus of the message was upon those who hurt, abuse, and molest children. However, the focus is not upon the person who has or will be begging to be cast into the sea with a millstone around their neck. The focus is upon the children...those children who were made, or who are being made spiritual orphans or millstone orphans, as we will call them. The focus of this message is upon children who have been or are being molested, abused, or hurt by others.

“Childhood should be a time of growth and nurture where each of us learns to find safety and security. If you are a millstone orphan, learning to be safe and secure is one lesson you never learned. If you were intentionally hurt, abused, or molested as a child you never learned to trust. You never learned that you could feel secure. You never learned that you could feel safe. What you learned is fear, doubt, distrust, and anxiety. What you learned as a child is that you would always be helpless and hopeless....No wonder Jesus pronounced the wrath of God upon

those who damaged your soul. No wonder Jesus pronounced the wrath of God upon those who took advantage of you. If you are a millstone orphan your ability to believe in God in the way non-orphans believe has been torn away.”

“If you are a millstone orphan your ability to believe in God in the way non-orphans believe has been torn away.” Sadly, this sentence speaks to one of the greatest evils that have been inflicted upon you by your abusers. For, the horrific experiences that you underwent have made a loving, trusting and child-like confidence in God almost unimaginatively difficult for you to know and experience. The very ones who should have taught you how to experience such a loving, trusting and filial relationship with God have, through their betrayal of your trust, made such an experience nearly impossible for you.

When I reflected upon the horrible betrayal that has been perpetrated against each of you, I kept seeing a picture that hung at the bottom of the stairs when I was a child. Each time I came down those stairs, I saw that picture. In my mind’s eye, I can still see it. It is a picture that you have probably all seen. A smiling angel is carefully guiding two small children across an old rickety wooden bridge that has a gaping hole in it. You just know that despite the obvious dangers to the children they will make it across safe and sound because God’s holy angel is guiding them.

The priests or adults who abused each of you as children should have been like that angel. They ought to have safely guided you to the other side of that bridge, into the arms of a loving, caring and kind God who is waiting with open arms on the other side. Instead of being angels of light, leading you safely to God, however, they were for you angels of darkness, leading you away from him. They were not from God, nor did they act according to his holy will. They are deserving of the wrath of Jesus and the heavy millstone and deep sea that awaits them!

Even though they prevented you from making it across that bridge as children, God is still on the other side and he is calling softly to each of you, longing for you as much as the merciful father longs for the returning son.

There are many sad and lasting consequences to the betrayal by those angels of darkness. As just one example, the language, symbols and stories that are found in both the Old and New Testaments and that are usually used to describe our beautiful relationship with God on the other side of that bridge are words that you cannot now easily or readily hear; they are a language that you cannot now readily understand; they describe a hope that all too often seems to lie just beyond your ability to grasp or to lay hold of.

And yet, for those of us who were never abused as children but who were, rather, safely guided by true angels of light across that bridge, we can only use the language, symbols and stories that speak readily to us of a loving relationship with God. Sadly, our words too often utterly fail to speak to you. I am, therefore, fully aware of the huge communication chasm that will likely be our mutual experience today. I can only speak of what I know but you will be able to hear it only through the lens of your past and hurtful experiences. Let us acknowledge that fact and yet let us nevertheless still try. May God who is the God of the impossible permit my words to speak to you in some way --if not to your ears and thus to your understanding, at least to your hearts and thus to your will!

GOD IS LOVE

Scripture describes God as love. My spiritual patron, St. Francis de Sales, is known in the Church as the “Doctor of the Love of God” because of his many teachings and writings on this subject. His appreciation of God as Love began while he was still a teenager studying in Paris. At seventeen he took a course on the very brief biblical book, the “Song of Songs.” That course forever changed the way he saw God, the human person, and the relationship between them. In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict speaks much about this same book. He reminds us there that in its original form this book was probably a collection of love songs that were sung at Jewish weddings. Only later did they become Scripture. There the sacred author makes use of them to describe the loving relationship between God and the human family.

The two principal characters in this inspired book are an engaged couple deeply in love. In the craziness of a crowded and busy outdoor Jerusalem market-place they somehow get separated from one another. Frantically, they search the city for one another. When at last they find each

other, they run to one another, embrace, kiss tenderly and exclaim, **“Finally I once more have hold of you and I will never again let you go!”** Francis de Sales sees in this couple God and each individual human person, especially every believer.

From this short biblical work, the impressionable young Francis discovered the true nature of God’s love as an eternal, searching, and very personal love. It taught him that we have been created in such a manner that we too are restlessly searching for God. And when we find Him, we joyfully enter into a loving union with him that begins here on earth and lasts forever in heaven. God and each believer are meant to say of one another what the lovers say each other in the Song of Songs: **“My lover belongs to me and I to him”** –forever! (6:3)

Francis de Sales never forgot the lessons of the Song of Songs. He had already known from Scripture that God is love (I John 4:8). From the Song of Songs he now learned that love is essentially a relationship. Thus, to be related to God is as natural to us - *and as necessary*- as breathing itself. This is why Francis will later teach in his celebrated Treatise on the Love of God that we have a natural inclination to love God above all things (Book 1, chapter 16), and he describes that natural inclination as a shepherd’s crook by which God, the divine Shepherd, **“gently holds us and draws us to himself”** (Book 1, chapter 18). In the fullness of revelation, we learn that Jesus himself is the shepherd’s crook. Thus, it is Jesus who **“gently holds us and draws us to himself.”**

For Francis the cross of Jesus represents the most powerful, the most moving, expression of God’s love for us, a love that is at once both tender and suffering. So it is on Calvary at the foot of the cross that we learn the full extent of God’s love for us. Francis pens a little poem to describe that love. **“Live, Jesus, live! Your death upon the tree shows all your boundless love for *me!*”** (Book 12, chapter 13).

“Your death upon the tree shows all your boundless love for ME! This is the essential part for Francis. Jesus died for me! I am the beloved for whom he has searched throughout all the

centuries and for whom he searches in the streets and alleys of Jerusalem. He wants to find me and when he finds me to hold me close to his Sacred Heart and never again to let me go. He wants to protect me, to love me and to care for me –always! And I was made *to be found and to be loved by God!* Thus, I will be whole and complete and the person I was always meant to be only when I am found by God and loved by God!

Such a loving, tender relationship with God is what was meant to be for each of you. But along the way to your finding and being found by God; along the way to that loving union and that mutual love for which you were created, your journey to God was short-circuited by the very people who should have pointed out the way to you, by the very ones who should have smoothed out the path for you to God. Instead, they placed an impossibly high obstacle and barrier between you and Jesus! They rightly deserve to have the biblical millstone tied tightly around their necks and to be cast into the sea! They have made of each of you a “millstone orphan.” This was NEVER what God wanted for you and this is NOT what he wants for you now. God will not rest until your journey to him resumes again and until – at long last! – you find your way across that bridge to his waiting arms!

I AM LOVEABLE!

One of my favorite chapters in St Francis de Sales’ spiritual masterpiece, the Treatise on the Love of God, is Chapter 12 of Book 12. The saint speaks there of the three hours that Jesus suffered on the Cross. He asks himself what was Jesus thinking during those long and painful hours of agony? He concludes that while suspended between heaven and earth in that final act of sacrifice and suffering love, he was thinking of you and me –but not in some global or universal sense, but of you and me as the unique individual that each of us is, with our first and last name. For Francis was utterly convinced that the love of Jesus for each of us is so personal that he named us, one by one, during those long hours of suffering. On the Cross he was offering himself to his Father as an oblation for each of us, taking upon himself *our* wounds, *our* sufferings, and *our* death so that we might not die but live happily and forever with God. I would like to quote a few lines from that chapter. Francis calls his reader, “Theotimus,” which

simply means “One who loves God.” In this passage Francis speaks directly to Theotimus and when he does so he wants you to hear your own name.

“Behold Jesus our High Priest, and regard him from the instant of his conception. Consider how he bore us upon his shoulders as he took on the task of redeeming us by his death, “even to death upon a cross.” O Theotimus, the Savior’s soul knew all of us by first and last name. Above all, on the day of his passion when he offered his tears, his prayers, his blood, and his life for all people, he sent up for you in particular such thoughts as these: ‘Ah, my eternal Father, I take upon myself and charge against myself all the sins of poor Theotimus, to undergo torment and death so that he may be freed from them and may not perish but live. Let me die, provided that he may live! Let me be crucified, provided that he may be glorified!’ O supreme love of the Heart of Jesus, what heart can ever bless you as devoutly as it ought to?!”

In his Introduction to the Devout Life, Francis enunciates that same principle of making *personal* the truths of our faith. He speaks directly to “Philothea” in the Introduction, just as he speaks directly to Theotimus in the Treatise. Both names have the same meaning: “Anyone who loves or desires to love God.” He writes in the Introduction:

“Consider the love with which Jesus Christ our Lord has suffered so much in this world, especially in the Garden of Olives and on Mount Calvary. That love was for you. See, my Philothea, it is certain that on the tree of the Cross, the Heart of Jesus, our beloved, beheld *your* heart and loved it.” (Part V, ch 13)

From the cross, the supreme act of love for you and me, Jesus thought of each of us by name, by first and last name. He knows you. He knows what you have suffered and how you have been abused. He knows that in many ways you may feel that because you have been abused you are now somehow not loveable. You may even feel ashamed and unworthy because of the evil that another has done against you. But you are --and will always be-- one of Jesus’s little ones, one of his “millstone orphans.” He loathes what has been done to you and strongly rejects those who

have been the perpetrators of the abuse against you, his innocent ones. But *you* he loves; *you* he will always treasure. He searches tirelessly for you. It is you he runs after and when he finds you - or when you are able to let yourself be found by him- he will say to you what he hopes you will then be able to say to him: ***“I now have hold of you once again and I will never again let you go!”***

One of you has written powerfully of a hard-won insight into how you are loveable despite the feelings to the contrary that you may have because of what you have experienced. She knows that you are not your thoughts; she understands that you are not your feelings. You are good, loveable, worthy. Listen to her words. They speak of her insight into the cross and into the Lord’s love for her from that cross:

“Mine was a revelation no more impressive than peering up from the crushing cross on my own shoulders to notice greater shoulders on which the Cross was laid. It was then that I loved, and then that I realized my love had been purified by the passage through suffering. My story, reflecting as it does a million stories of impossible burdens and incredible triumphs, is about holy ground, sanctified by nothing I ever did and defiled by no one. *As the main character*, I had the surprising realization that I could not be defiled by the sins of others. It was a long road. Written by God, the storyline connects dots created by skipping stones of belief in the great deep dark hollow.” (T. Pitt Green, “Restoring Sanctuary,” Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing, 2010; page 206).

As the main character, I had the surprising realization that I could not be defiled by the sins of others. The wounds of having been abused do indeed remain, just as the wounds of the crucified Jesus remain in the risen Christ. He carries those wounds, now glorified, into heaven just as you will carry your wounds there as well. But the resurrection has transformed the wounds of the crucified Jesus from the painful results of hideous deeds by evil men into shining centers of saving grace to all who look upon them with faith. Like his wounds, your wounds also

remain, but they are now transformed by his love for you from things of darkness and shame into channels of grace and light and of all things good and holy and true.

Once again, one of you has expressed this better than I can when she writes:

“There is a promise in this story. The promise is not mine to give, but ours to receive. It is divinity seen in the Five Wounds still deforming the hands and feet and side after Resurrection, after release and perfection, after gaining eternity where no more suffering exists. The seraph is raised above us not in perfect human form, but with resurrected wounds in perfect life.” (“Restoring Sanctuary,” 206).

“The Five Wounds remain, and our own wounds remain; they remain long after the triumph that rises from utter destruction. They remain because there can be no forgetting, because we are told to mark the Passover, to remember the deliverance, to cling to our identity because we are a people ransomed by God with a final blood sacrifice. It was not my plan, but I survived exile by remembering. These wounds cure doubt when, after all the lies and broken human bonds, words cannot be trusted, and we wander with lost meaning in a foreign land....Wounds do not go away. Harm does not get undone. Pain does not subside.” (“Restoring Sanctuary,” 206-07).

Her advice to you is the advice of a victim who has become a survivor and is now in the process of becoming much more:

“Move with a crutch,” she advises you, “but move forward with your wounds and your memories...If your heart feels dead, it is becoming a tomb for glory awaiting resurrection. Test the promise. Lay ashes at the foot of the Cross. He will return beauty. This is the economics of belief. You have been promised life. It will be yours in abundance if only you believe.” (“Restoring Sanctuary,” 207).

You carry your wounds always, as Jesus does his. But, as our author states, you can survive your own exile by remembering what God has done for you in Jesus—for each of you!-- and by remembering his searching, tender love for each of you by first and last name. You can become whole once again and, in becoming whole, you can become for others what she has become for you: “*wounded healers.*” She writes: “***Together with divinity, we who are wounded and brokenhearted can become seraph to the wounded and to the brokenhearted. On our rise toward divinity, what we see is death on a cross, but what He returns is life that cannot die. Look carefully.***” (“*Restoring Sanctuary,*” 207).

Perhaps in the end only a “millstone orphan” who has survived exile by remembering who God is and what God has done for us through the blood of Jesus can truly speak to other “millstone orphans” and become for them that most special of people, “a wounded healer.”