

INSPIRED WORD

February 17, 2016

TEACHING

Deacon Chuck speaking: In the beginning we thought we would have a series on evangelization, but in prayer we saw that God didn't want that. He wanted us to renew our hearts, to come close to Him, and to grow in holiness before we even think about evangelizing. So that is why we are here and that is why we have these Lenten sessions.

Deacon Chuck speaking: So this is the first session of the 5 weeks of "Growing Seeds of Holiness" and the topic tonight is be **Preparing the Soil: Be Holy**. What I am going to be talking about is all about **love**. We go way back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were created as holy people. They were created by God, in original holiness, to be intimate with God; and you can read in early scriptures that God spoke to them in the garden. They were His true son and daughter and they were filled with sanctifying grace, but then you know what happened to them. Instead of loving God, trusting in Him, and being obedient to Him and living in humility, they listened to a voice of evil and they began to doubt. In the Catholic Catechism it says that man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This was man's first sin. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in His goodness. **(Reference: Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 397)** Man, seduced by the devil, wanted to "be like God," but without God, before God, and not in accordance with God. **(Ref: CCC paragraph 398)** So that is what happened – Adam and Eve were holy and they turned away from God; they sinned, and that sanctifying grace was pushed out of their lives. Because of that, the world became what it is today.

Now the Father would not let us go, brothers and sisters; He wouldn't let us walk away. If we look at the **Eucharistic Prayer IV**, we see the pursued love of God the Father. The prayer goes like this: **"Father, we acknowledge Your greatness: all Your actions show Your wisdom and love. You formed man in Your own likeness and set them over the whole world to serve You, his Creator, and to rule over all creatures. Even when he disobeyed You, and lost Your friendship You did not abandon him to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and find You. Father, You so loved the world that in the fullness of time You sent Your only Son to be our Savior. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, a man like us in all things but sin. To the poor He proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy. In fulfillment of Your will He gave Himself up to death, but by rising from the dead, He destroyed death and restored life. And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for Him, He sent the Holy Spirit from You, Father, as the first gift to those who believe, to complete His work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace."** To that we can all say, "Amen! Thank You, Jesus!" So, the Father sent Jesus to save us, to restore us and to call us to holiness again.

A question for you: Are you holy? Yes, we are! A part of being holy is to recognize your identity – that we are the sons and daughters of God the Father. How did you get there? Through Baptism - when the Spirit came into your life, you were adopted as the sons and

daughters of the Father. Our true happiness comes from that realization! So, because we are baptized, because we are sons and daughters of the Father, we are holy people right this moment! In **1 Peter 1: 15 – 16**: “Be holy in all that you do, just as God Who called you is holy.” The scripture says, “Be holy because I am holy”, says the Lord. So the Lord has called us and gifted us with the Holy Spirit, therefore, we are holy! Again in **1 Peter 2: 9**: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him Who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.”

Some more questions: How do we grow in this holiness? We are holy people already, but how do we grow and become more open to the Spirit of God? The first is to imitate Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh is to be our model of holiness.” (Ref: **CCC 459**)

Sometimes you see teenagers wearing the bracelets that say “What Would Jesus Do?” In a way that is very appropriate, because we are called to be like Jesus. He is our model and we are called to be conformed to Him, so that it is no longer us who live, but Christ Who lives in us. So Jesus is the model for holiness, He is the One to Whom we are conformed, and He is the One Whom we need to imitate. It is fairly simple, but not necessarily easy! We also strive for holiness in living the Ten Commandments. Saint Teresa of Avila describes holiness as bringing our wills into union with God’s will. So, doing what God wants us to do; doing what the Spirit is asking us to do; and by so doing, we can grow in trust, love, obedience and humility – the things from which Adam and Eve turned away. We grow in love of the Father, trust in His love, show obedience to His will, showing humility before Him, and **recognizing that He is God and we are not!** We are all called to holiness!

There are obstacles to holiness. The three that are normally thought of first are: **Our Fallen Human Nature**; the second is **The World (Our Environment)** and the third is the **Flesh and the Devil**. We see in our world things happening, things being proclaimed that certainly are not in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ. It says in **Romans 12: 2**: “Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind.” So we cannot think in terms in which the world thinks, we are called to think in the way that Jesus would think. **Romans 7: 19** says: “I don’t do the good I want to do, but instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do.” Has anyone here experienced this? You want to do good, but somehow you just don’t do it! You just don’t do it; you turn away from it! It is the flesh, people, it is very powerful. Do you realize that Satan has a plan for your life? And his plan is eternal separation from the Father Who loves us. In **Ephesians 6: 12**: Paul tells us: “For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” So we do have a real battle going on! We have a battle with evil, and some people would prefer not to think about it. But it is a true battle and we have to be aware that it is taking place and that Satan, the liar, wants you to accept his lies. Those are the three easy ones that people talk about – our fallen human nature, the world, and the flesh and the devil, but there are others! These have to do with our own attitudes! When I was a boy, they used to show me pictures of the saints that were on holy cards. Does anyone remember those? I didn’t like them because they all looked so very sad! Then when they would read the history of these saints, some of the saints were whipping themselves, or laying on beds of nails, or starving themselves. I kept asking myself, “Do I want to do that? This sounds bad

to me!” Years ago there was a song that came out by Billy Joel and some of the words to the song were: “They say there is a heaven for those who await, some say it is better, but I say it ain’t. I would rather laugh with the sinner, than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun. Only the good die young.” Holiness is not somberness; holiness is not sad-faced, holiness is joy! Another attitude, bad attitude, is that it is just impossible for us to do this, only a few really achieve this pinnacle of virtue. So I will settle for mediocrity! Settling for mediocrity is absolutely not a good thing to do. Pope Saint John Paul said that the very nature of our Baptism calls us to holiness, and since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of His Spirit, it would be **a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity!** We do not want to settle for mediocrity!! We want to reach out and to become open to the Spirit of God, so that we might be more transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Another bad attitude is: “I can’t be an achiever like Mother Teresa and do all the things that she did! I just can’t do that! I can’t make that kind of effort!” But do you know something, we don’t have to make that kind of effort, because saints are not cookie-cutter saints. They are very different; they are us responding to God’s grace in our own minds. I don’t know if there are any Mother Teresas around here, anyone who would like to be like her. What I hope that we all want is to do what the Lord wants us to do – to follow His Holy Spirit! Do you know something? He does most of the work in us!!

I am going to ask you to follow along with me in this story. There is a woman by the name of Linda Douty who is a spiritual director in Memphis, Tennessee and she talks about Teresa Avila’s description of the life of personal growth and of prayer. This is what she says: Teresa imagined a field that needed watering. Can you imagine a field that needs watering? In the **first stage** of spiritual growth, it is as if we are dragging a heavy broken bucket, dipping it into a well, hauling the water up to the surface bucket by bucket and watering the field. This represents the condition where we try desperately to please God, to obey the rules, and to get it right for God. So in your mind picture this laborious task! This is the first stage – obey the rules and get it right!.. In the **second stage**, our prayer and progress leads us to notice a stream running beside the field. All we have to do is drag the broken bucket through the water and haul it to the field and water it. That is a little bit easier, but we still control the pace of our own efforts; that is we decide what tasks and projects we will undertake, and what the content of our prayer will be, and how we will nourish our spiritual lives to be pleasing to God. So this is a little bit easier than the first stage. The **third stage** is a gate at the end of the field that opens to an irrigation system. All we have to do is fling the gate open and the water goes pouring into the field. It seems that God meets us with grace so nurturing and powerful that all we have to do is open up ourselves to it. Our faith journey becomes not so much what we can do for God, but what God can do through us, for us, and in us! There is a **final stage** and in this stage we merely stand in the rain. When I first internalized the image of standing in a cleansing rain, virtually the saving love of God through no effort of my own, I was overcome with the realization that Divine Love didn’t require my effort, it was not depend on my deserving, it was truly, profoundly, eternally **unconditional!!** Just picture that cleansing rain of God’s grace falling on you!

In October 2013, Pope Francis said: “What can I, a weak fragile sinner do? God says to you: ‘Do not be afraid of holiness. Do not be afraid to aim high, to let yourself be loved and purified by God, do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit.’ “Let us be

infected by the holiness of God. Every Christian is called to sanctity, and sanctity does not consist especially in doing extraordinary things, but in allowing God to act. It is the meeting of our weakness with the strength of His grace, it is having faith in His action that allows us to live in charity, to do everything with joy and humility, for the glory of God, and as a service to our neighbor.” Isn’t that beautiful? Holiness is about relationship, my brothers and sisters. The Father calls all of us; He calls us personally as His sons and daughters. He calls us to want Him, to accept His love, and to love others as well.

A French Dominican priest, who was a scripture scholar, pondered and prayed for 35 years about the Passion of Jesus. In this pondering and praying about this Passion of Jesus, he believed that the Father spoke to Jesus as He was dying on the cross with the words of the **Song of Songs**, the words of love. And I quote, “Come, then, My Love, My lovely One, come! For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the season of glad songs has come, and the song of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines, in bloom, give forth fragrance. Come then My love, My lovely One, come! Show Me Your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is beautiful.” **(Reference: Verses 10 – 14)** And trusting in His Father, Jesus gave up His Spirit. Holiness is a relationship with our Abba, Who is crazy about us. **Abba, our Father will never, ever, let us go!!**

EXHORTATION

A gardener with true hopes of success will never think of planting a seed without first preparing the soil. Preparation might involve turning and loosening the dirt, breaking up hard spots, throwing out rocks and even adding fresh rich soil. All of this is critical work, to be done in advance, for the seeds to have a favorable opportunity to grow and flourish. In our journey of holiness, we must also make preparations for the seeds God has to plant in us. We need to evaluate our hearts, the garden where God wants to plant seeds in us. Hard spots need to be broken up, rocks and obstacles need to be thrown out, and fresh desire needs to be mixed in with bold complacency. We must prepare the way!

PRAYER

Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father, is our Brother, and He now stands before the Father. Jesus, we give You praise in this place tonight. Pour forth Your Holy Spirit upon us that we might give glory to the Father, to You Jesus, and to the Spirit, from the depths of our being, recognizing the love that the Father has for each of us, the love that You, Jesus, have for us and the salvation that You won for us. Help us to recognize the strength, the wisdom and the caring that the Spirit gives us, to make us holy. So, Lord, we want You to be here and walk among us tonight; touch our hearts, strengthen us, let us know the love that You have for us. Glory to You, Lord!

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 55: 10 – 11: “My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat. So also will be the word that I speak – it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do.” That sounds like a promise to us from the Lord that, as we go through these five weeks, asking Him to grow these seeds of holiness in us. He promised us that His word will not return to Him empty, but will come to do everything He sent it to do.

PRAYER

Lord, give us the grace we need to give our hearts to You in a deeper way. Help us to yield our hearts to You, to surrender them to You in a deeper way. Give us hearts of deeper love for You, Jesus. Give us Your heart, O Jesus! Glory to You, Lord!

SUMMARY / PRAYER

A few minutes ago we sang the verses from the song, "Oceans". One verse that kept impacting my heart is this: 'Spirit, lead me where my trust is without waters.' I believe that is our call! We heard the message tonight, to prepare the soil - the soil of our hearts, the soil of our lives, the soil of our minds, and the soil of our Spirit – and to start removing the rocks from that soil. These are not just words that we heard here, but we are to take them with us. We need to ponder and think about them. Each one of us received a hand-out tonight and these pages are a study guide for us to follow so that we can prepare the soil. We need to read these pages and ponder what they are saying. There are also some daily scripture readings which we need to read, and then answer the questions that are asked of us in these study guides each week – to write down what the Lord is saying to you individually each week. Then in each study guide is an action step – there are questions to ponder and then there is an action step. Ponder means to give deep thought to what you have read or heard tonight and each week. Everything in these study guides is designed to help us to put into use what we have heard, what we have read, and to make it personal to each of us. If we do all of these things, we are going to grow deeper, we are going to grow in love and obedience, and grow in trust. We are taking a step in faith to move forward and to go deeper. When God asks us to move forward and to take the step in holiness, it is like Deacon Chuck was saying earlier tonight – we are standing in the cleansing rain, and the rain helps to break up the hard spots in our soil and to remove the rocks and the obstacles that need to be cleared away. That is what we are called to do! Lord, we thank You for this night and we thank You for Your word! We thank You for calling us to holiness! Lord, give each one of us a measure of trust that You know we each need to take the next step in this Lenten series – to grow in holiness, to grow closer to You and deeper in love with You; and to grow deeper in faith and trust in You. In Your Name, Jesus, we pray! Amen.