

Homily: Jan. 16, 2023

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

We gather to celebrate God who prompts us to continue growing into the person he designed us to be---to grow according to his image of love, to grow into being Christ-like. Today, we commemorate Martin Luther King, a man who grow into Christ-likeness in his fight for equality and justice. We stand before God realizing our need to grow in Christ-likeness, because we do not completely fulfill what God intends for us and by us. So we call out—"Lord, have mercy."

My opening words about growing into God's image of love and becoming more Christ-like was prompted by these words from the letter to the Hebrews: "Son [of God] though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

That statement calls me to realize that Jesus was indeed divine, but human at the same time. He was not a fully-grown complete little God as a kid. In the early part of Luke's gospel, too, we hear, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Much of his learning came from what he suffered.

The suffering meant here is whatever challenging and painful experiences contributed to Jesus becoming that fully loving person. Especially as a young adult in his ministry, he suffered from temptations. He suffered through push back from his own people, who were upset, grumbled, angry with his audacious ways of loving—when he forgave sinners, ate with tax-collectors, let a prostitute wash his feet with her tears and forgave an adulterous woman. These challenging moments his how Jesus grew in obedience and commitment to being the loving person God created him to be. Jesus' way of growing is also our way – growing especially during the tough experiences and challenges of life. Martin Luther King surely exemplifies growing into Christ-likeness and his prophet-hood through beatings, jailings, and push back.

I feel encouraged to be more positive about my negative experiences, which can be the gracefilled moments for me to grow up—to become more loving and wise.

The end of the gospel today tells us another precious aspect of growing up. Jesus' teachings were like new cloth and new wine. That's what Jesus' way of life felt like to his first disciples and first Jewish and gentile Christians. Living like Jesus invited them to be new – to be different from their former ways. What they were learning from Jesus had to be translated into concrete new life—being open to the Samaritans; being willing to engage with the marginal peoples of society and being willing to forgive 7 X 70 times.

If not willing to translate all this great and loving wisdom of Jesus into concrete living, this would be tantamount to some form of destroying oneself—making bigger holes in my life, like new cloth on old cloth shrinking in the first wash and tearing a bigger hole. Or, like experiencing the loss of both good wine and its container, if trying to take in the new but not allowing my thoughts and life to expand into something more loving.

The reflection today might hinge on a question like this: “When or what causes me to feel stressed and strained by some internal conflict because I am holding on to something old that would best be left go? When and about what do I deep down “know better” but simultaneously don't want to change?

Jesus invites us to live his new way of new life as consistently and thoroughly as possible because that is when we will be truly loving and God becomes a source of salvation for others through us. And we will be authentically joyful at the same time.

“Son [of God] though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”