

When I was honored to receive the invitation to give the Carl J. Peter Lecture, I knew almost immediately what the cornerstone, or what I describe to my students as the “core proposal,” of the lecture would be. Years ago, when I was reading Pope Francis’ section, “Preparing to Preach” in *Evangelium Gaudium*, something he wrote jumped out at me and grabbed me, because he explicitly stated a crucial truth for every preacher: “What is essential is the preacher be certain that God loves him...” (#151). And this theme is taken up again by Pope Francis in his 2024 Encyclical, *Dilexit Nos: On The Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ* right from its introductory paragraph:

“HE LOVED US”, Saint Paul says of Christ (cf. *Rom* 8:37), in order to make us realize that nothing can ever “separate us” from that love (*Rom* 8:39). Paul could say this with certainty because Jesus himself had told his disciples, “I have loved you” (*Jn* 15:9, 12). Even now, the Lord says to us, “I have called you friends” (*Jn* 15:15) ...Because of Jesus, “we have come to know and believe in the love that God has for us. (1 *Jn* 4:16)” (#1).

It is important to note that this is not a philosophical or abstract love that automatically emanates from Divine Being. *Dilexit Nos* #108 cautions us that “grace [should] not be seen as a kind of magic or neo-platonic emanation, but...as a direct relationship with Christ.”

God loves you! God delights in you! God has a particular affection for you! His love is not abstract. Think of the image of Father in the parable of the prodigal son: “Filled with compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.” (*Lk* 15:20). Who gave us that image of the Father? Jesus! God reveals his Fatherhood through Jesus’ sonship.

Jesus does not begin his public ministry until His Father’s voice is heard saying “You are my Beloved Son.” How are the Apostles prepared at the Transfiguration? They hear the voice of the Father say “This is my Beloved Son.” Everything that Jesus did on earth is a response to the love with which the Father loves Him!

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, in a retreat he gave to Pope Paul VI and the Curia in 1976, said that God’s deepest mystery is his Fatherhood. “And God’s greatest revelation of himself [is] the Son, in whom [the Father himself] can be discerned.”ⁱ

Jesus, by living in the Love of the Father, by living his Identity as the Only Begotten, Beloved Son, reflects and radiates God’s Fatherhood.’

At the Last Supper, the Apostle Philip said to Jesus, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.” This most central cry of the heart is awakened by the Presence of Jesus. And “Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’” (see *Jn* 14:9-13) Imagine what that would have meant to Philip. The Father’s love is not far away and abstract. The kindness, mercy and affection that Philip has received in his friendship with Jesus is a true, incarnational expression of the Father’s love for him. Jesus’ sonship radiates the Father.

And what does the Resurrected, Beloved Son, say to us? “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them ‘Receive the holy Spirit...’” (*Jn* 20:21-22) And what does the Holy Spirit do? “God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, “‘Abba, Father!’” (*Gal* 4:6). Jesus sends us, so that the radiation of our sonship can reveal the Father’s love.

As a preacher, you are invited to live in the love of Father and Son, to let everything you do and preach radiate from the fact that you are generated by and live in this love...so that Preaching becomes the radiation of your sonship, which can lead your hearers to the Father. Not the radiation of a generic sonship. Not an automatic, or neo-platonic emanation, but the

radiation or *your* sonship. Pope Francis reminds us, “What is *essential* is the preacher be certain that God loves *him*.” That each preacher be certain that God loves him.

When I took up the mantle of Fr. Peter Cameron to teach homiletics at St. Joseph’s Seminary, Fr. Cameron told me that I should not teach the students to preach like me, but rather I should help the students to preach like themselves. Experiencing God’s particular love in your life allows you to preach with your authentic voice. A façade or false personage in preaching would seem to imply that you are not convinced that the you are loved and favored by the Father. Your voice is most authentic when it is generated by God’s particular, unique love for you.

When have you experienced the embrace of the Father? Likely in many moments, which may not be as dramatic as the experience of the Prodigal Son, but are nonetheless impactful and memorable. I invite you to think about these experiences so that this lecture itself may not seem abstract.

When I had been a priest for just a few months, I would regularly visit the parochial school in my first parish assignment. When I would go to the younger grades, I would precede my lesson by singing children’s bible songs (with accompanying movements!) which I had learned volunteering in the Missionaries of Charity summer camp in the Bronx. After leading the second graders in a raucous version one of those songs, a very excited young girl asked me, “Does God sing??!!” And I remember my mind racing and wondering “What do I say?! Does God sing? But God the Father is not corporeal...if I say he doesn’t will she be disappointed? If I say he does will I be sentimentally misleading them?” Thankfully humanity, perhaps aided by the Spirit, won over, and I responded, “Yes, of course God sings!” However, in the coming days and weeks I was not quite certain of my answer. Perhaps it was appropriate...or perhaps I would end up with a millstone around my neck! I would return to class and think, “Oh, these are the kids that I might have lied to.” Now, please understand that I did not obsess over this, but I am a nervous New Yorker, so it continued to float around in the back of my mind somewhere. Until a few weeks later in the Office of Readings when I read this passage from the prophet Zephaniah, “The LORD, your God...will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals (Zephaniah 3:17). I have never forgotten that moment. It was as if, through that scripture, the Father was peaking at me, in an overwhelmingly affectionate way, as if to say “you dummy! Yes, I sing!” And what a beautiful expression of God’s affection that he sings over us with joy!

Pope Francis tells us “What is essential is the preacher be certain that God loves him,” and the Homiletic Directory #3 offers another essential for the preacher: poverty of spirit. The Directory tells us that this is more essential than being a great orator: “It is not necessary to be a great orator in order to be an effective homilist.” Perhaps that statement bears repeating for many of us to hear and absorb. The Homiletic Directory offers examples from salvation history, “...we recall that Moses had a speech impediment (Ex 4:10), that Jeremiah thought himself too young to preach (Jer 1:6), and that Paul, by his own admission, experienced fear and trepidation (1 Cor 2:2-4). It is not necessary to be a great orator...What is essential...above all, is that in his spiritual poverty, [the preacher] invites...the Holy Spirit as the principal agent that makes the hearts of the faithful amenable to the divine mysteries.” And let us not forget that in our hearts the Spirit cries out “Abba, Father!” (see Gal 4:6)

Let’s look more closely at the examples the Homiletic Directory gives to us:

Moses has a long conversation with God in his first encounter, his call narrative and a little while into the conversation Moses, who has a speech impediment, says to the Lord “If you

please, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor recently, *nor now that you have spoken to your servant*; but I am slow of speech and tongue.” (Ex 4:10). Moses is expecting that if God wants him to fulfill his vocation, he should take the speech impediment away. But the Lord has no intention of doing that. “Who gives one man speech and makes another deaf and dumb...Is it not I, the Lord?” (Ex 4:11). The Lord has no intention of taking Moses’ weakness away, as would later happen to St. Paul, who after asking that his particular thorn be removed, is told “in weakness, power reaches perfection.” (2 Cor 12:19). Moses is very disturbed by the fact that the Lord is asking him to preach and yet is not taking his weakness away. So Moses says, “If you please, my Lord, send someone else!” Only at that point are we told, “Then the LORD became angry with Moses.” (EX 4:13-14). It seems that the Lord has no problem conversing with Moses about his weakness, but when Moses suggests that the Lord choose someone else, that gets the Lord angry, because we are not interchangeable. There are no pinch-hitters or understudies in the eyes of the Father. It’s as if God is saying to Moses, “how dare you tell me to choose someone else. I have chosen you, I love you in a particular way, I choose you for this particular ministry, I send you to these particular people.” This is expressed later by God to Moses when he tells him, “You have found favor with me and you are my intimate friend.” (Ex 33:17)

And that speech impediment that God did not take from Moses likely helped to make him approachable to the people. When God came down on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning and trumpet blast, the people backed away and said to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen, but let God not speak to us, or we shall die.” (Ex 20:19). Later, Moses recounts for the people God’s response to their preference for Moses to speak to them, “What they have said is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kindred, and will put my words into the mouth of the prophet.” (Deut 18:18). The people are afraid of God speaking directly to them, but Moses, with his speech problem, is very approachable.

Then the Homiletic Director calls our attention to the prophet Jeremiah: “The word of the Lord came to me: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.” (Jer 1:48). We have often heard “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you” out of its scriptural context; and certainly this assurance from God can be applied to every person made in His Image. But let’s not forget that these affectionate words were said to a prophet, a future preacher! The first thing God said to him: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” Jeremiah’s call to preach begins with God affirming his very personal and particular love for him.

The passage continues, “‘Ah, Lord God!’ I said, ‘I do not know how to speak. I am too young!’ But the LORD answered me, do not say, ‘I am too young.’ To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you...”

The calls of Moses and Jeremiah are in some way similar to the father’s treatment of the prodigal son. The prodigal son makes his speech about not deserving to be called a son, but the father doesn’t pay attention. He instead calls for the celebration. God does not pay much attention to Moses and Jeremiah’s concern and self-consciousness about their perceived weaknesses. He loves them, he calls them and he sends them. He doesn’t put a lot of stock in our self-consciousness regarding our weakness. He tells us to look at Him, to know that He is with us.

We see the same thing when Peter is called by Jesus, “Depart from me, Lord, I am a sinful man.” “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men.” (Luke 5: 8,10) As if to say, “fear not, you will be with me, and I will be with you, always.”

And then, we have Paul, who had been persecuting Christians. *Dilexit Nos* #46 writes beautifully of St. Paul, “Saint Paul, struggling to find the right words to describe his relationship with Christ, could speak of ‘the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2:20). This was Paul’s deepest conviction: the knowledge that he was loved. Christ’s self-offering on the cross became the driving force in Paul’s life...because he knew that something even greater lay behind it: the fact that “*he loved me*” ...Paul, moved by the Spirit, [marveled] at the greatest and most essential thing of all: “Christ loved me”.

This echoes what St. John Chrysostom writes of St. Paul in the Office of Readings on the Conversion of St. Paul: “The most important thing of all to [Paul], however, was that he knew himself to be loved by Christ. Enjoying this love, he considered himself happier than anyone else...”

Let’s move forward by about 16 centuries. St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, in her autobiography, writes about being chosen to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart, and that the Lord would give her a priest to help her in this vocation: Fr. (later St.) Claude Le Colombiere. One day, when receiving communion from Fr. Colombiere, the Lord revealed to St. Margaret Mary his particular love for this priest, and instructed her to reveal it to him, and she writes, “the profound humility and gratitude with which he received this message touched me so much, that I profited more [from that] than all the sermons I might have heard [from him.]”ⁱⁱ I don’t doubt that St. Claude was a good homilist. But what is St. Margaret Mary saying? Seeing on Fr. Colombiere’s face how moved he was by Christ’s love for him preached to her more deeply than any particular homily that he gave. The preacher should preach from his experience of God’s love for him.

Let’s come forward to our own century, and to the secular world: Brett Favre, the great quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. His father died of a heart attack December 21, 2003, and the next day Brett Favre played one of his best games, Packers vs. Oakland, and he played it for his father. And only at that point did he begin to think of the Football Hall of Fame. In his acceptance speech he said, “A new goal entered into my mind...I said to myself...that I would make it to the Hall of Fame so I could acknowledge the fact of how important my father was...in my career and my life...I was determined...to get to this point to acknowledge how important he was. I would not be here before you today without my father. There is no doubt whatsoever.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Later in the speech he recounts that His father was his high school head coach, and he had played a bad game the week before, and after practice he remembered “sitting outside the coach's office...waiting for my father to come out...And I overheard my father talking to the other coaches, and he said: “I can assure you one thing about my son, he will play better. I know my son. He has it in him...[and] my chest kind of swelled up...I never forgot that... comment.”^{iv}

What happened to Brett Favre is an echo, just an echo of the love God the Father has for us. Brett Favre wanted to get to the Football Hall of Fame so that, just once, he could speak publicly about his father. We get to preach every week, every day about the greatness of the Father. What a privilege it is to be called preach the greatness of the Father’s love! And, you know, a good gauge of a good homily is that you are looking forward to giving it. As if to say: “I want people to know the greatness of the Presence of Christ...” A greatness with which I am

familiar, and which I have experienced, and for which I am grateful! If you are not looking forward to giving a homily you have prepared, then pray and work on it some more!

I hope you can recall many moments in which the love of God the Father has made your chest swell: Maybe it has happened in prayer, maybe through a similar experience with your own father, or through a mentor or spiritual father, or through a pastoral experience in which the result was so beyond your own capabilities, or through the Father peering at you through scripture, as happened with me with Zephaniah when the Father assured me that he sings. Or perhaps through mercy you have received, through the Father's love entering the depth of your heart and healing your deepest shame.

What are your own prodigal son moments? I am not recommending that you explicitly preach your most shameful moments that were met with mercy, but that gratitude at God's love, at his loving favor toward you, should inform all of your homilies. Think of Peter who betrayed three times, and was met with Jesus asking him three times, "Peter, do you love me?" This had to inform Peter's preaching, whether or not he preached explicitly about that experience. In fact, we see the seeds of this in Peter's initial vocation: "Depart from me I am a sinful man." "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching men."

What is your own call narrative, your own vocation story? Your vocation story is a witness of how God worked in the concrete and particular circumstances of your life, as he did in the lives of Moses, Jeremiah, Paul, Peter, St. Claude, and even Brett Favre. Your vocation story is a witness of the Father's particular love for you. And I know you all have the two-minute, five-minute and fifteen-minute version of your vocation story. And it is easy to tell, easy to preach, because you are speaking about facts that happened to you. In some sense, all of your homilies can spring from this joy that God has worked in your life, has loved you particularly and called you. And in telling it you may help your listeners come to the awareness that God is working in their lives, and they might not even be noticing it. But you can help them to notice that, like you, God the Father is generating them with His love.

I will recount a piece of my vocation story, which I will preface with a reference to the book *Maurice and Therese: Story of a Love*, written by a great Auxiliary Bishop of New York, Bishop Patrick Ahern. It's a beautiful book that I encourage you to read during your seminary years. What you see in that book is that Sr. Therese is always encouraging Maurice, and he discovers Jesus' love for him through her. There is one letter in which he is upset about a number of things in seminary life and Therese responds to him, "Your unique treasure, is it not Jesus?"^v And in his response Maurice writes, "There is no doubt that Jesus is the treasure, but I found him in you, and he was easier to approach."^{vi} Through Therese's daughterhood, Maurice understood and began to experience Jesus particular love for him. Through her daughterhood, we could say that she became a mother to Maurice.

I bring up this book because it helps me speak about my first spiritual director, Fr. Richard Neilson, may God rest his soul. Because he looked at me like Sr. Therese looked at Maurice. He was always encouraging me, always offering mercy, always certain that God would be with me. Like Brett Favre's father after his bad game in high school, Fr. Neilson always had a confidence in me that I could not understand. My weaknesses didn't scare him, perhaps because he understood that weaknesses could bring about a spiritual poverty which would help me in my discipleship and in my priesthood. I hope that you are fortunate enough to have spiritual directors through whom God's particular love is revealed to you.

When Fr. Neilson passed away he had his funeral at the motherhouse of a community of sisters, and he was permitted to be buried in their cemetery, even though he had not been one of their chaplains. The funeral was filled with priests who had been his spiritual directees, a beautiful radiation of Fr Neilson's fatherhood to us because he had been a beloved son who gloried in Christ's love for him.

After the funeral, the superior approached me and asked if I would give them their community retreat later that year. I didn't know them, but likely they knew of me through *Magnificat*. The retreat would be a difficult time of year, just before the beginning of the academic semester, and I would probably not have committed to doing it but, because of Fr. Neilson, I said yes. The retreat would spring forth from my sonship of the Father whose love I encountered in such a powerful way through Fr. Neilson. An eight-day retreat would mean sixteen conferences, eight homilies, many one-on-one meetings.

About halfway through the retreat, I asked one of the sisters how the community knew Fr. Neilson. She responded, "Who?" I reminded her of the funeral at their convent a few months before, and she said, "Oh, him! I'm not sure, I think one of the sisters in the infirmary was friends with him, yes, and I think he wanted to be buried at a convent cemetery so that the sisters would pray for him." I had imagined that he was a big friend of the community and now it seemed that perhaps only one of the sisters knew him. So I marched myself out to the cemetery and right up to his grave and I said, "Fr. Neilson, I'm gonna kill you! I'm in the middle of this retreat and it's a lot of work, and many of them don't know you!" It was actually a beautiful moment because I could imagine Fr. Neilson, with his impish smile respond to me "Richard, is there a problem here? I would think it's a good thing to give a retreat to religious. Don't you?" And it was a real prayer at his grave. I was really engaging with this man through whom God's fatherly love came to me.

Although I did not preach about him during that retreat (why would I, most of the sisters didn't know him!) my joy of being loved by Fr. Neilson/God the Father was certainly what generated that retreat. The entire retreat was my response to the Father's love that came to me in a particular way through Fr. Richard Neilson.

Who are the mentors and fathers the Lord has given to you, through whom did he show his particular love for you? Let's look again at Scripture.

Let's consider Paul's farewell to the presbyters of Ephesus, to whom he preaches, "Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God's grace." (Acts 20:24) And later we are told, "When he had finished speaking he knelt down and prayed with them all. They were all weeping loudly as they threw their arms around Paul and kissed him, for they were deeply distressed that he had said that they would never see his face again." (Acts 20:36)

Paul's spiritual poverty, his trepidation to hand on what he received, his sonship, made him a father to all of those presbyters. And it was God's fatherhood that they received, but not an abstract fatherhood! They threw their arms around Paul, they kissed him. Paul's sonship radiated God's fatherhood to them; and I am going to guess that those presbyters of Ephesus went on to radiate God's fatherhood to others through their sonship, which they experienced in a particular way through Paul.

And then let's look at 2 Kings 2, one of my favorite stories: Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was the great prophet called by God, favored by God. He could hold the rain to correct a king, he could raise a widow's son from the dead. And when Jezebel was after him for exposing

the false gods of Baal, Elijah withdrew to a cave, and God sought after him there and tenderly asked him “Elijah, why are you here?” And Elijah did not put on a façade, he lamented that the Israelites forsook the covenant and he was the only one left and, after being faithful to God’s call, they were seeking to take his life. And God’s love assured Elijah through a tiny whispering sound. (see 1 Kings 19)

And God tells Elijah to call Elisha to be his assistant. Elijah is the great prophet, and Elisha is simply the assistant who follows him around. And in 2 Kings 2, Elisha somehow understands that Elijah will be taken up that day. The two of them are in Gilgal, and Elijah says to Elisha “Stay here please, the Lord is sending me on to Bethel.” And Elisha responds, “As the Lord lives, I will not leave you.” And at Bethel Elijah tells Elisha that he is being called to Jericho, but that Elisha is to stay put. But Elisha again says, “As the Lord live, I will not leave you.” Finally, Elijah tells Elisha to stay while he goes on to Jordan. But Elisha follows, and when Elijah comes to the Jordan river, he strikes the water with his mantle and it parts and he walks through. Perhaps he thought his crossing over would lose Elisha, but when he comes to the other side Elisha is right behind him (he’s like the little brother that you can’t shake!). And in a beautiful moment, Elijah says to Elisha, “Ask for whatever may do before I am taken from you.” It seems that he is impressed with Elisha’s perseverance, a perseverance born not from exceptional endurance but from Elisha’s sonship. Elisha does not want to leave the love of God that comes to him through Elijah.

And Elisha said to Elijah, “May I have a double portion of your spirit.” And Elijah recognizes that that was a lot to ask! He told Elisha, “You’ve asked something that is not easy.” Maybe he thought Elisha would ask for his mantle or some souvenir or relic, nonetheless he promised Elijah, “Still, if you see me taken up from you, your wish will be granted.”

And Elijah was taken up by the chariot, and Elisha cried out “My father! My father!” Elijah was not his biological father, but he was a spiritual father, a real father to him! So he cried, “My father!” and kept looking until the chariot disappeared into the sky. Elijah’s mantle came down and, perhaps, Elisha was a little annoyed thinking, “that’s not what I asked for.” But he took up the mantle and started to walk home, but then came to the Jordan. Perhaps now he was mad, realizing he couldn’t get home because the water that Elijah had parted was now blocking him. And Elisha cried out, seemingly from the bottom of his heart, “Where is God?” As if to say, “You’ve taken away a father, you’ve taken away the person who was a great sign to me of your love...Where are you?...you can’t remain abstract!” He cries out, “Where is God, the God of Elijah?” This is interesting! In the Old Testament we normally hear about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but Elisha says, “the God of Elijah.” Because Elijah is the one through whom God revealed his particular love for Elijah.

And then Elisha slammed the water, perhaps out of anger, and the water parted. And Elisha realized that he had received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. And Elisha would go on to be a great prophet of Israel. We recently had the reading in which Naaman the Syrian is sent to a great prophet of Israel to be healed. It’s not Elijah to whom he was sent, but to Elisha.

What was Elisha saying to Elijah when he asked for a double portion of his spirit? The implication behind the request might be stated, “Elijah, you are the great prophet of Israel. Through you we know that God is with us; and now you are going to be taken away? Then what am I going to do, tell stories about you? That’s not enough! I can’t just tell stories! Somehow you have to be with us. You have to remain. You Spirit needs to remain!”

Elisha's love for Elijah reminds me a bit of the time of Covid, when first some, and then many parishes did live streams of their Masses. What fascinated me was that so many people wanted a livestream of their own parish. But they could have gone onto their computers and watched any Mass. They could see the Pope's Mass, or the Bishop's, or homilies from well-known and well regarded preachers. They could watch a Mass or homily from any site they wanted. But what they wanted was a livestream of their particular parish. My parish priests are the priests that preach to me. I want to see my priest; I want to see my father. That particularity was fascinating. The radiation of your sonship becomes the radiation of God's fatherhood acting through you to your people. As with Paul to the presbyters in Ephesus, as with Elijah to Elisha.

When we enter into our sonship we somehow become faces of the Father. It sounds scandalous to even utter that, but it is as the Father wants it to be. "What is essential is the preacher be certain that God loves him." Loves him, not as a mere, interchangeable instrument, but as a son, a particular son that he loves in a particular way.

We see this in the Gospels. Think of the woman caught in adultery that Jesus treats with such tenderness, while the Samaritan woman is treated kind of gruffly. She has had five men be tender to her before and they sent her away, so Jesus knows that tenderness won't work for her, he must reveal his love to her in a different way. We are not interchangeable, but uniquely loved!

St. John Henry Newman writes in "University Preaching" (from *Idea of a University*, Part 2, Article 6, #7) "Nothing that is anonymous will preach." He does not want us to forget that preaching must be from a particular preacher to particular hearers. Interestingly, the more particular an image or recounted illustration, the more universal it often is. But let's look at the fuller quote, "Nothing that is anonymous will preach; nothing that is dead and gone; nothing even which is of yesterday, however religious in itself and useful. Thought and word are one in the Eternal Logos, and must not be separate in those who are His shadows on earth. They must issue fresh and fresh, as from the preacher's mouth, so from his breast, if they are to be 'spirit and life' to the hearts of his hearers."^{vii}

What you preach, from your particular temperament, your particular history, from the way in which the particular scripture you will preach has awakened your heart, should issue "fresh and fresh" from your mouth, and so from your breast! Recall Brett Favre who said that his chest swelled when he heard of the confidence that his father had in him.

"Nothing which is of yesterday, however religious in itself and useful." Elisha could not merely tell stories about Elijah; the Spirit of Elijah had to animate him, so that the love of God could be present in real time through Elisha, and likely in a different way or with a different accent than when it came through Elijah.

The Apostles didn't just tell stories of the past, they received the Spirit! They didn't go out and preach until Pentecost. Remember those two mysterious men in white when Jesus Ascended? They said to the Apostles as they were looking up, "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven." (Acts 1:11). Who were those mysterious men? I wonder if they were Elijah and Elisha? But that's beyond me to know.

And why are the Apostles looking up? Because they are waiting for Jesus' Spirit. Why? Because they can't just tell stories about Jesus! Jesus needs to be present!

So Pentecost happens. And the flames are very interesting: "Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest *on each one of them.*" (Acts 2:3). Peter

preached differently than John, who preached differently than Matthew, who preached differently than James, and so on. Think of the beautiful feast that Pope Francis gave us the day after Pentecost, Mary, Mother of the Church. Perhaps at Pentecost Our Lady pondered on the meaning of what Jesus meant when, from the Cross, he said to her “Woman, behold your son.” She knows Jesus as a mother, and she is seeing her son Jesus alive in the apostles. But as she sees Peter alive with the Spirit of Christ, he is even more himself, as John is more himself and James is more himself. We flourish when we are animated by the Spirit of Christ.

You see, the Church is not a place where we just tell stories about Jesus. The Church is a place where Jesus lives, now. Jesus, who promised, “I am with you always.” The Father wants His love to radiate through you now.

Again, John Paul II on that retreat to Pope Paul VI and the Curia in 1976 said that God’s deepest mystery is his Fatherhood. “And God’s greatest revelation of himself [is] the Son, in whom [the Father himself] can be discerned.”

And in a play that John Paul II wrote called “The Radiation of Fatherhood he reflected on how the Father can be discerned in each of us. He expresses this beautifully in a long dialogue between his main character, Adam, who struggles with God, and with his daughter, Monica.

MONICA: “I linked the immense longing in my soul precisely with you...”

ADAM: “I can trace only from outside that Great Meaning that we long for with all our human nature...Through the stream, *do you not embrace the source?*”

MONICA: “Through the stream, the source embraces me too.”^{viii}

As if to say, “I know you’re a stream, dad, (or, as Newman would describe it, a “shadow”) but in your particular love for me I can experience, I can discern the infinite love of God the Father.” Similar to when Maurice says to Therese of Jesus, “I found him in you, and he was easier to approach.” Similar to the presbyters of Ephesus embracing and kissing Paul. Jesus, the face of the Infinite Father, mysteriously takes flesh in and through us. This is almost scandalous to say. How is this not idolatry or blasphemy? How does this not diminish God to become present in the world through sinners like us?

If God is power, this would diminish him. It would somehow lessen God. But St. John tells us, and Pope Benedict repeated to us in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, God is love! God is not power; God is love. God has power, but God is love. God can reveal himself without power, a baby in a manger or a man on a cross. God cannot reveal himself without love, because love is who he is. Or perhaps we could say that God’s greatest power is his love. And so, the fact that God comes to us through Moses or Jeremiah or St. Paul or Fr. Richard Neilson, this mysteriously magnifies His greatness. This is what Mary said in her Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” The fact that the Lord of the Universe is a baby in her womb magnifies his love for us, it does not diminish it. If God were power, this would be a diminishment, but God is love.

There is a great little novel I would highly recommend to you which cleverly illustrates differing points of view about God, one which sees God as love, and one which seems more to emphasize power. The book is *Fr. Malachy’s Miracle* by the Scottish writer Bruce Marshall. It is a story of Canon Geoghehan, a very proper pastor who wants his congregation to improve their chanting, and Fr. Malachy, a not so proper Benedictine monk who has been sent to the parish to help the Canon with this task. And Bruce Marshall writes:

“Fr. Malachy accepted Revelation as a beautiful poem, which was, by the grace of God, true! Canon Geoghegan accepted revelation as a set of facts, unaesthetic in themselves, which were, unfortunately, true.”^{ix}

Whose homilies would you prefer to hear?

We are not merely communicating a set of facts. Of course, we are communicating facts, but we are doing much more. The Homiletic Directory, in #6 and in #29 tells us that exegesis is essential. The historical critical method should be used because Jesus walked the earth in a particular culture at a particular time, this truth cannot be compromised. Historical exegesis is important, but not, in itself, enough, because it can seem to leave Jesus in the past. Of course I want to preach about the particular realities and the facts that the Gospels recount. And I speak about them because the One who lives then, lives among us now.

Again, think of your vocation story; I bet every time you tell it there is something new that strikes you in the telling. You are recounting moments in the past, but they bring life, because the way God was loving you then is alive and present, because God is loving you now, at the very moment you are recounting those facts.

The Gospels happened 2000 years ago, and I want to be very attentive to what happened, because it is moving and effective. I want to know what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, I want to know how he answered Philip at the Last Supper, it is crucial to know those facts. And it is crucial to be aware and to experience as you read and pray and preach these facts that the love that was present then, is present to now, and seeks, through you, to be present to your hearers. You are a witness to His living presence, as the Apostles were after Pentecost.

No façade, and no technique, can replace the experience of sonship which generates my being and which generates my preaching.

Years before he was Pope, Ratzinger addressed this theme in a book called *Dogma and Preaching*, “There is something inherently inadequate and unsatisfactory about all theological discourse concerning the method and form of preaching: when genuine preaching occurs, in every instance it is ultimately a gift that cannot be forced by any theory...For such preaching means that a bit of Pentecost comes to pass...”^x He is not dispensing with theological discourse on methods of preaching, but he is saying that it’s not enough. In every instance of true preaching, “a bit of Pentecost comes to pass.” Any method that we employ will be useless if it is not imbued with our current experience of the love of God the Father. St. Paul would say that without love I am a clanging cymbal.

So when you preach, enter deeply into the Father’s love for you. Let your true identity as a son of the Father through Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit emerge, and your preparation to preach will not be a mere technique, but a relationship. Discover what the Lord is giving to you, first for your good, because you are more than a mere instrument, and then for the good of your people as the love he gives to you overflows to them.

Be mindful of method, form and technique, but always be in relationship with the Father. Note those times when you are preparing a homily and through your *lectio divina* or through an illustrative image that emerges the homily seems to begin to write itself. As you are doing your *lectio* and preparation, note the core proposal that emerges. Note the images that may come to mind, which are often richer than they may first appear. These images are a gift, because the Holy Spirit is with you. Perhaps as you prepare you may experience of the Father peering at you through scripture, as he did with me when I read the prophet Zephaniah in the Office of Readings. When you find that your homily is emerging and the elements are coming together

there is often the sense of a real gift that is happening, an experience of God loving you particularly. Take note of this, relish it, be grateful to the Trinity for it! The gratefulness of a son!!!

To begin my conclusion, I would like to offer two more iconic scripture passages for the preacher.

First we have the young man described at the end of Mark's Gospel. When Jesus is arrested he runs out of the garden, "Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked." (Mk 14:51-52). In the chaos he panics and runs off, losing his linen cloth and his innocence. And we hear again later of a young man, I would propose the same young man, sitting calmly at the empty tomb, proclaiming, perhaps we could even say preaching, the Resurrection to the women who had come, "When the Sabbath was over... On entering the tomb, [the women] saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, 'Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'" (Mk 16: 1, 5-7)

When we put on our albs, we are icons of that young man clothed in a white robe, preaching the Resurrected Christ, not as a mere fact, but as a present reality that has brought us out of the chaos of sin and imbued us with His mercy and new life.

Knowing that we are loved, that we are beloved sons, keeps us young! When I visited Fr. Neilson toward the end of his life as he was dying of a slow moving cancer, he looked at me with such life and excitement in his eyes and he said to me "Richard, the soul is young! The body gets old and deteriorates, but the soul is always young!" He was clearly amazed by this experience of spiritual youth. And his communication of his experience reveals that we will always be sons. We will never grow out of the Father's love for each of us. And our sonship can radiate the Fatherhood of God, and can move our hearers as St. Paul moved the presbyters of Ephesus.

And now I want to look at St. Paul from First Corinthians 13: "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing." And then... "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not rude, it is not quick tempered... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.... Love never fails."

I think we can mistakenly read "having" love as merely offering our love to others. But what does St. John tell us about love? "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:1-10)

Thus before Paul gives love, before he witnesses to us what love is, this former persecutor of Christians must first receive the Father's love. Imagine the implication of Paul's words for our own preaching: "Love has been patient (*with me*), love has been kind (*to me*), not jealous, not pompous, not quick-tempered (*toward me*)... Love bears all things.... Love never fails"

The young man abandoned Jesus in the Garden. Paul persecuted Christians. And they would both proclaim the eternal love of the Father that comes to us in Christ Jesus. Likely not

despite their sins, but because of the mercy they received after having sinned. You might not speak explicitly or in detail about all that the Lord in his mercy and love has done for you and is doing for you, but that experience will inspire, inform and enliven your preaching, and all of your priestly ministry.

As a preacher, as a priest, the Lord uses everything in your life to build you up and to build up His Church. In loving you, He is also loving his people. He loves you so much that he invites you through Holy Orders, in a unique way, to be a beloved son and, thus, participate in His Fatherly love for his people. Preaching is a privileged participation in God's fatherly love. He calls each of us, knowing our weaknesses, knowing our history, knowing our thoughts, and he promises to be with us.

I would like to finish with *Dilexit Nos* #209: "Mission, as a radiation of the love of the heart of Christ, requires missionaries who are themselves in love and who, enthralled by Christ, feel bound to share this love that has changed their lives...their greatest concern is to share what they have experienced. They want others to perceive the goodness and beauty of the Beloved through their efforts, however inadequate they may be. Is that not the case with any lover?"

And I will take the liberty to paraphrase that last question: "Is that not the case *with any and every beloved son?*" ...every beloved son who is called to be united to Christ and, through his sonship, to radiate God's Fatherhood.

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ⁱ Karol Wojtyla, *A Sign of Contradiction*, Cluny Media, Providence, RI, 2021, p. 26

ⁱⁱ *Autobiography of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque*, Tan Books, Charlotteville, NC, 2012, p.84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brett Favre. Pro Football Hall of Fame Speech, 2017. <https://www.wbay.com/content/news/FULL-TRANSCRIPT-of-Brett-Favre-Hall-of-Fame-speech-415745493.html> (WBAY, Green Bay, WI)

^{iv} Ibid

^v Bishop Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Therese, Story of a Love*, Doubleday, New York, 1998, p. 188.

^{vi} Ibid, p. 199

^{vii} John Henry Newman, "University Preaching," *The Idea of a University*, Newman Reader — Works of John Henry Newman, 2007 by The National Institute for Newman Studies.

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^{viii} Karol Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theatre*, "The Radiation of Fatherhood," translated by Boleslaw Taborski, University of California Press, Ltd., London, 1987, pp. 345, 349, 351.

^{ix} Bruce Marshall, *Father Malachy's Miracle*, Image Books, Garden City, NY, 1955, p.46

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