

22nd Sunday
9/3/2023

NOT MOLDING BUT BEING MOLDED

In the 1980s there was a television series called *Family Ties* featuring a much younger Michael J. Fox as Alex Keaton. In one episode, Alex is devastated because his girlfriend broke up with him. He asks out another girl but takes her to the same restaurant he went to with his girlfriend, asks his date to put up her hair the way the ex-girlfriend did and to order the same food that she did. Understandably, his date has enough and tells him that he's not yet ready to be dating again. He was trying to mold her into who he wanted her to be rather than to let her be who she was.

At times perhaps you have experienced something similar. Maybe a parent, a spouse, a child or a friend, often with sincere and good intentions, has tried to mold you into who that person wants you to be. And let's be honest, perhaps at times we have tried on some level to do the same thing to others.

That's the experience of Jesus in today's gospel. Last week, Peter made that marvelous profession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and Jesus entrusted him with a special ministry. This week picks up where we left off last week. Peter is right, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God but Peter is also wrong. He knows that Jesus is the messiah and yet when Jesus starts to explain how he will be a suffering messiah, how this will entail suffering, death and then resurrection to new life, Peter, no doubt with good intentions in his heart, tells Jesus this would never happen to him.

Peter is trying to mold Jesus into the type of messiah he thinks Jesus should be rather than the type of messiah that Jesus really is. In the second reading today St. Paul says, *Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* While thinking he is doing good, Peter is actually tempting Jesus to do evil.

Jesus will have none of it. *Get behind me Satan.* Peter is trying to lead Jesus instead of following him. *Get behind me,* means to follow me. Peter may have been sincere but he was mistaken. Jesus is explaining his Paschal Mystery, the movement

from life through death, death on a cross, into new life that Jesus pioneered and in which we all follow. By denying the Cross, Peter is also denying the Resurrection.

What Peter fell into is something we can easily fall into as well. One author has noted, It's been said that we cannot change Christ but we can invent an imaginary Christ trying to mold him into who we want him to be that reflects our own ego-projections, our own narrowness, to justify whatever it is we want to do. In other words, the same author points out, we can create an idol, a false Christ, a God of convenience who will always agree with what we want and will never challenge us.

Instead, Jesus calls us to the Cross. For many of us, all our lives we have heard about carrying our cross but to the apostles this would not have been a pious platitude but something gruesome. Crucifixions were cruel, slow, painful, public exercises of state sponsored terrorism. And yet the cross isn't an end but a means; it's the way to new life; it's the way to resurrection. St. Paul also says, *Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice*. It may not be a crucifixion but we're all called to make a sincere gift of ourselves.

Jesus calls us to follow him in sincerity and truth, not trying, like Peter, to mold him into who we want him to be but rather to let him, in his wisdom, in the wisdom of the cross not only to mold us but to make us one with him.

We receive a foretaste of all this in the Eucharist. As we celebrate the Eucharist, we don't simply remember something like the way we remember the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, but rather we enter into it. We enter into the hour of Jesus' death and resurrection, we enter into the hour of his one sacrifice, the hour of his Paschal Mystery. One simple way of saying it in generations past was, *The Mass and Calvary are the same*. The only difference is the time and place. At Mass we are at Calvary, we are present at Easter morning.

We're all called to carry our own cross which isn't to glorify suffering but to realize that God can bring good from that, and that it can even lead to new life.

The Eucharist is our food for the journey of life, through the cross, into new life. Here, we gather together as God's people and simply coming together in faith can strengthen us. Jesus said, *Where two are three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them*. Here, Jesus nourishes us with his word. Mass is a uniquely

privileged place to listen to the word of God. Here, Jesus feeds us with Body and Blood, with his very self. Following Jesus, the true Jesus—not an idol we may construct—but the real Jesus, is hard but he helps us, he nourishes us. Here, strengthened by the cross of Christ, to go forth to love and serve the Lord and to bear our own crosses.

If you go for extended time without eating, you will grow weak and you will become more susceptible to disease and you will suffer. The same is true if we starve our souls, if we weaken or lose our devotion to the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, our souls will grow weak, more susceptible to temptation and sin and we will suffer.

Jesus comes to suffer, die and rise but Jesus also says that he has come that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Those two thoughts aren't in contradiction. Through sharing in Jesus' cross, we can share in his resurrection. May we never starve our souls of the Bread of Life and may we allow Jesus in his wisdom and in his mercy, to mold us to the people we are meant to be. Peter eventually understood that. He got it. With lives of intentional faith, may we do the same.