

Sexagesima 07/02/10 I Corinthians 15:1-11

In the fifteenth century, a rural village in Germany was home to a family with eighteen children. The family was poor, but despite the difficulty of making ends meet, two brothers in the family still held a dream, namely to pursue their talent as artists. With the financial situation bleak the two boys came up with their own solution to the problem. They agreed to toss a coin with the loser going to the local mines to work so he could support the other while he attended art school. When the first was finished with his training, he would support the education of the other, either by sale of his art works or by going to the mines himself. Thus, one brother went off to the dangerous mines while the other went to the art academy. After four years, the young artist returned triumphantly to a homecoming dinner. The artist rose from the table to drink a toast to his beloved brother for his years of sacrifice. He said, "Now Albert, it is your turn to go to the academy and pursue your dream; I will support you."

Albert sat at the table and tears began to flow down his cheeks. He began to repeat, "No, no, no." Finally Albert rose, wiped the tears from his face and holding his hands out in front of him said softly, "No, brother, it is too late for me to go. Look at what four years in the mines have done to my hands. The bones in every finger have been crushed at least once, and I suffer from arthritis so badly that I cannot even hold a wine glass properly to return your toast, much less make lines on a canvas with pen or brush. No, brother, for me it is too late."

Then, one day to pay homage to his brother who had sacrificed his life dream for him, the great artist, Albrecht Dürer, painstakingly drew his brother's hands with palms together and crooked fingers pointed skyward. He called his powerful painting simply Hands, but the entire world almost immediately opened its heart to the masterpiece and renamed his great work and tribute of love, The Praying Hands.

The story of the great sacrifice of Albert Dürer for his brother is truly inspiring. After hearing his story, whenever one sees Albrecht Dürer's masterpiece, The Praying Hands, it is impossible to not associate this work of art with the sacrifice of love it represents.

In today's Epistle from 1 Corinthians, Saint Paul describes the earliest account of the greatest act of sacrificial love the world has ever witnessed, the Paschal mystery — the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to our world in obedience to his Father's will, becoming human in all ways, save sin, and willingly gave his life so we would have the possibility of life eternal.

Not only does Paul describe the great sacrifice of Jesus' love for us, he also explains how he responded to this love through his energetic and unceasing missionary activity. Paul's words must challenge us to ask how we can respond in a similar way to the sacrificial love Jesus has shown us.

Saint Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and the long period

of preparation (scholars dispute whether it was fourteen or seventeen years) after his conversion for his mission, filled him with the tradition of Jesus. Thus, he wants to educate the Corinthians, a people he knew very well as evidenced by his letters to the community and his residence in the city for a considerable amount of time. He explains to them the significance of the extraordinary sacrifice of love that Jesus performed for us. First Corinthians is the earliest source for these sacred Christian traditions. In 11:23-26, Paul gives the first account of the institution of the Eucharist, the most important and common rite in our Christian tradition.

In today's Epistle Paul describes the Paschal mystery. He says the great traditions of Jesus were foretold in the scriptures. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise. It is through the promise and its fulfillment that the Corinthians and all others will be saved. Thus, it is essential that the community believe in Paul's message for it is the message of life.

Paul then articulates specifically the great events of our salvation. First, he says that Jesus died. Jesus truly suffered and experienced death for the remission of our sins. But the tradition of Jesus' death and burial is followed by the elation that he was raised and appeared to the apostles and even later to Paul and many other disciples. This great sacrifice of God's love demonstrated the length and breadth of what God was willing to do for us. As Albert Dürer went to the mines so his brother could attend art school, and in the process sacrificed his own opportunity for greatness and personal fulfillment, so Jesus, the Son of God, fulfilled his Father's will and sacrificed his life for us.

Paul realized that such a great sacrifice requires a significant response from us. He understood how privileged he was to be chosen by God to be a missionary. He believed this was his mission as partial payment for the sacrifice Christ endured for him. He confesses that he was unfit to be chosen, let alone to be called an apostle, as his former life as a zealous persecutor of the "new way" was antithetical to the notion of Jesus and his message. Thus, he concludes, "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (v. 10). Paul's conversion and his commission came in response to God who first loved him. Paul answered the challenge of Jesus by fulfilling his call as the first and greatest Christian missionary. All that Paul was given, especially his ability to respond to the Lord, has come from God. Clearly, Paul's message to the Corinthians is not only one of information, but equally, if not more importantly, one of challenge to respond to God who first loved us.

The scriptures consistently speak of our need, as Jesus' disciples, to sacrifice, to give our lives for others. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

— Luke 9:23-24

Jesus is asking his followers to give their lives for the betterment of others. This is not a call to martyrdom, but rather a challenge to find ways we can use our

lives, our talents, our opportunities, our time, and our resources to build the kingdom of God in our world.

The call to demonstrate sacrificial love is an everyday challenge to all, from young people in school, to men and women in the working world, and even those who are retired.

Albert Dürer did not know it at the time, but his agreement to go to the mines would not only produce a world-class artist, but at the same time ended any possibility he had to be an artist himself.

His act of sacrificial love was an imitation of the heroic sacrifice of Jesus, which Paul describes in our Epistle today. May we have the courage to do likewise as we continue to walk the journey of faith, one that leads to death, but eventually to resurrection and eternal life. Amen