2nd Sunday of Lent (2020)

If you have ever taken an onion apart you know that it has different layers to it. One needs to peel each of them away to get at the center core of the onion. The same is true of the human person. Do you agree that we have different layers to ourselves that we reveal to different people?

Take me for example. I have spent most of years as a priest in Dubuque and so in regard to my outer most level many people there know me as the former pastor of St. Joseph the Worker parish who was at one time a professor at Loras College, a teacher at Wahlert High School, and an associate pastor at St. Joseph the Worker parish. This level of me is my public persona – the way that most people know me.

On the next level are people like you who have heard my homilies over the past seven and a half years who have worked on committees and boards of education with me. You know a little bit more about me, for example, my personality and my likes and dislikes.

On the third level are my friends and family, people who I hang around with on a regular basis. At this level people know much about my life and how I got to be the way that I am today.

On the fourth or innermost level are a few people who know me very well – they know all my good and bad points but still love and respect me. These people are my best friends and my spiritual director.

Not only do I and all of us here have these different levels of self and different ways of relating people, but Jesus himself did also. This is what the gospel reading today is about – a reading known as the Transfiguration.
When Jesus began his public ministry he gathered a group around himself that the gospels describe as disciples. The twelve apostles were a group within this group of disciples. And as we found out in the gospel reading today, there was also an inner group within the apostles composed of Peter, James and John. It is to this inner group that Jesus’ deepest self, the core of his identity is revealed, that is, his divinity. We are told that “his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light”... and “then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

These three apostles first knew Jesus as a human being like themselves. They even began to think that Jesus might be the Messiah that they were waiting for. But the Transfiguration revealed something about Jesus that they never suspected – that he is not just human and the Messiah but also divine. Later generations of Catholics would speak about how Jesus is one person with two natures – human and divine.

There is no doubt that a human being by the name of Jesus lived. Not only the gospels but even several secular historians have written about him. A great deal of effort has been spent by theologians over the past thirty years or more trying to understand the human Jesus, asking the question “What was he really like?”

Historically, much has also been written about the divine nature of Jesus. But the divinity of Jesus is always a matter of faith; based, for example, upon gospel stories such as the Transfiguration.

Jesus shared his deepest self with Peter, James, and John. He needed people he could rely upon, people who knew who he really was. Who do we rely upon? What do they know about us?