

Bear Much Fruit

I celebrated Confirmation with 17 students from Immaculate Conception in Green River last Saturday, and with seven students from St. Helen in Fort Bridger and St. Mary Magdalen in Evanston on Sunday. The homily is below.

God can do amazing things with us, if only we cooperate. God could mend our broken families, if only we cooperate. God could overcome the racial problems in America and the divisions in our world, if only we cooperate.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard how Saul was transformed because he cooperated with grace. He persecuted Christians. He approved when Stephen was stoned. So, it not surprising that he was not embraced with open arms by the disciples. The Acts of the Apostles says, ***“Saul tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple”*** (Acts 9:26). Isn't it amazing how God changed Saul's life? He went from being an enemy of Jesus to one of his best disciples. Before, he was arresting the disciples for saying that Jesus was Risen. But afterward he ***“spoke boldly in the name of Jesus”*** (Acts 9:27). Saul became Paul who wrote more about Jesus than anyone else.

As a consequence of Paul's conversion, the first Christians were reconciled with a former enemy. If we cooperated with the Holy Spirit like them, then the division in our families and racial divisions could end. The grace of the Holy Spirit is far greater than our worst differences.

God can do anything with us, if only we cooperate. Paul needed to cooperate with the Risen Christ, and the disciples needed to accept his conversion. Sometimes, we do not accept that people can change. We remember a period of their life when they were caught up in bad habits. So we always think of them like that, instead of being open to the grace working in their lives today. Often I catch myself thinking of someone based on their past, not their present life of grace. Like the disciples who realized that Paul was changed, we need to be open to how the Holy Spirit can transform us and others.

Are you open to the grace of the Holy Spirit and its transforming power? The Holy Spirit is often described as fire because fire is powerful. Today, open your hearts to the fire of the Holy Spirit who transforms us. In Confirmation, we receive the same Spirit who changed Paul.

The first step in cooperating with the Lord is to believe that he abides in us. Simply believe that the Risen Christ dwells in you through the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, ***“Remain in me, as I remain in you”*** (Jn. 15:4). “Remain in me” means dwell in me, like you dwell in a home. We need to believe that he dwells in us individually and in our Church – not only in the tabernacle, but in the Church as the People of God. The Lord gives himself to us just as he did to the first disciples. St. John wrote, ***“The way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us”*** (1 Jn. 3:24).

St. Catherine of Siena was keenly aware of his indwelling. She had a vision of Christ taking her heart away and giving her his heart. He said, “Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now you see, I am giving you mine, so that you can go on living with it forever.” As a sign of that mystical experience, she actually had a scar in her left side (p. 351, *Awakening Love*). After that, Catherine felt different. She was aware of Christ within her. She was on fire with love for other people. Experiences like that are never for the person alone. Rather, God blessed St. Catherine to help all of us believe that Christ dwells in us.

First, believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in you. The second step in cooperating with the Lord is to bear fruit. Jesus said, ***“Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it***

remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me” (Jn. 15:4). Apart from him, we wither like a branch cut off from the vine. But when we dwell in Christ, we bear much fruit.

A faithful disciple bears fruit. What is the fruit he wants to see in us? He wants to see his love in us. A few verses later, Jesus sums up his entire message by saying, **“My command to you is to love one another”** (Jn. 15:17). People should see in us the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, humility, chastity, and perseverance. The saints shine with these qualities.

This weekend four students from either Green River or Fort Bridger chose St. Francis of Assisi. One student wrote: “St. Francis grew up in a wealthy household and later left his life of lavishness. He gave up his riches and helped the lepers. Saint Francis urged people to penance, brotherly love, and peace.” Francis did crazy things that looked foolish because he was on fire with God’s love. He kissed a leper, and he went to Egypt to encourage peace when everyone else was bent on killing Muslims.

In the midst of the Crusades, the Sultan of Egypt declared that anyone who delivered him the head of a Christian would be rewarded with a gold piece. That year his armies killed about 5,000 crusaders. Then St. Francis of Assisi and a Franciscan brother crossed the battle lines unarmed, were captured, and badly beaten. When the soldiers brought them before the Sultan, Francis said that they had been sent by God. Francis greeted the Sultan with the greeting, “May the Lord give you peace.” When the sultan saw his enthusiasm and courage, he listened to him and asked him to stay with him.

One student from Green River chose Saint Martin de Porres. She wrote: “I chose him because he is the patron saint for social justice and mixed-race people. I am myself a mixed race, so that led me to learn more about him. I really admired the fact that he and his sister founded a little dwelling for orphaned and abandoned children. His days were filled with nursing the sick and caring for the poor, and he did this without caring about their skin color or status.”

Martin’s mother was either a black woman or a native of Panama. His father was a Spaniard. The two never married. His father abandoned Martin, so he grew up destitute. He could have been a bitter man because of his father’s abandonment, but he was filled with goodness for others. People called him, “Martin the charitable.”

The saints show us what happens when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. They bear much fruit by sowing peace and loving like Christ. Jesus said that the seed that falls on good soil **“produced fruit a hundredfold”** (Lk. 8:8). You and I were created to bear much fruit and to produce a hundredfold.