

**Homily for August 23, 2009 (21st Sunday in Ordinary Time)
St. Martin de Porres Parish (Milwaukee, Wis.)
Joshua 2:1-2a, 15-17, 18b; Psalm 34; Ephesians 5:21-32; John 6:60-69**

About a week before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. traveled to New York to have dinner with his friend, Harry Belafonte. A popular entertainer and prodigious fund raiser, Belafonte was a strong defender of human rights around the world and a stalwart in the civil rights community in the U.S.

By late March 1968 Dr. King was seeing the nation and the movement to which he had dedicated his life unraveling in many ways. The civil rights community was divided between those promoting nonviolent social change and those demanding a more radical, even violent, approach. The war in Vietnam was in full throttle. Watts, Newark, Detroit and even Milwaukee had seen “long hot summers” marked by street battles between police and citizens and whole neighborhoods on fire. “White flight” from cities to suburbs was accelerating.

Reflecting on this, Dr. King turned somberly toward his dinner host and said, “Harry, I’m afraid we’ve integrated into a burning house.”

“Well, Doc,” Belafonte asked, “what do you think we should do?”

Dr. King paused for a moment and said, “I guess we’ve got to learn to become firemen.”

The word of God today similarly invites us to become firefighters and to train those who will come after us to do the same. And Lord knows, there are “fires” all around us.

As many families prepare to send their children back to school and as we celebrate several children’s baptisms today at St. Martin’s, I am reminded of the vital role that parents play in the lives of their kids. A week ago, I was having lunch with a friend of mine who teaches in the Milwaukee Public Schools. She loves teaching, but she also feels under incredible pressure to not only help her students to learn but to repair the effects of poor or even non-existent parenting.

Being a parent is one of the greatest and also most difficult vocations. It requires a lot of time, love, and yes, money. It also demands that parents deal with the many cultural forces that promote values contrary to those of our faith: consumerism, materialism, cynicism, moral relativism, etc. Instead of teaching our children to be firefighters, these forces teach them to be careless smokers, fire watchers, and even pyromaniacs!

Any firefighter will tell you that it’s not the fire that usually kills people but the smoke. Kids today have to deal with a lot of smoke! Some social scientists, for example, have started to talk about an epidemic of narcissism in our country, an age of entitlement and celebrity in which it’s more important to be famous than actually accomplish anything and to look good rather than to do good.

Narcissists believe that they are smarter, better looking, and more talented than everyone else. If others disagree...well, to the narcissist that’s just further proof of their inferiority. Narcissists emphasize winning and achieving at any cost, even if it requires cheating or hurting others. They can be found from Hollywood to Wall Street and everywhere in between, even in the church!

Narcissism breeds a certain cluelessness or conscious disregard about how one's behavior impacts others. A recent article at the CareerBuilder.com web site featured a survey of some of the things hiring managers actually heard in job interviews. Among the gems these HR professionals heard were:

- "If I get an offer, how long do I have before I have to take the drug test?"
- (Telephone call) "Can we meet next month? I'm currently incarcerated."
- "What is your company's policy on Monday morning absences?"
- "I'm not really a big learner. You know...some people love learning and are always picking up new things, but that's just not me...."

Clearly, we have a lot of work to do! Training ourselves and our children to be firefighters starts with introducing them to the waters of Baptism; but it also requires that we teach them: (1) Commitment; (2) Community; and (3) Courage.

In our first reading, Joshua and his household reminded us of the importance of commitment. Faced with a community of fellow Israelites that too often looked upon their covenant with the Lord as a mere marriage of convenience, Joshua first recounted everything that God had done for them. Then he essentially told them to get off the fence: "If it does not please you to serve the Lord, then decide today whom you will serve." Then he added, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Serving God and avoiding being choked by the smoke means that sometimes we have to get on our knees.

Whether we're aware of it or not, that confrontation at Shechem and the question, "Whom will you serve?" is a question each of us ask and answer as individuals and families by how we choose to live our lives. In our second reading, St. Paul used the example of the household of the family to teach the household of the church about the signs of a healthy and godly community.

In this part of Ephesians, Paul was trying to provide some practical advice for a young church about how to conduct themselves in a society that looked upon Christians with suspicion and often hostility. In an environment where the church's survival was the priority, Paul did not deem it wise to openly challenge the patriarchal ordering of families, the authority of the state, or even the institution of slavery. Instead, he encouraged a more gradual revolution of the mind and heart in which the defining mark of marriage was no so much headship but rather love and service inspired by Christ's self-sacrifice for the sake of the church. Though head of the church, Jesus "handed himself over for her."

Finally, in our gospel reading Jesus showed us costs of courage. Over the past month, we have been reading and reflecting of John 6. After the miracle of the loaves and fishes and after revealing himself as the Bread of Life, Jesus was faced with failure and rejection. The gospel tells us that he "knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him;" but on a human level, it still must have hurt the Lord to see so many walk away.

It hurts to be in a burning house and to fight the smoke and flames. It's hot, hard to see, and difficult to breathe. But when it's the only house you've got, you do what you have to do. May we not be afraid to get on our knees and crawl when needed; to trust in the water we've been blessed with to help us; to show commitment, build community, and demonstrate courage; and to remember that through it all we also have a source of air: "the spirit that gives life." +