

5th Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:30, 12-13, 14-15
Hebrews 5:7-9
John 12:20-33
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A young boy wakes up long before the rest of his family on a rainy Saturday morning. Today is his mother's birthday, and now is the perfect time to make a present for her. But what should he make? He knows she likes his artwork; since she's displayed several of his drawings of air and sea battles on the refrigerator, along with the B+ he got on his spelling test last month. (Thankfully, she hasn't seemed to notice that the "+" was added to the "B" in his own shaky handwriting. It was, after all, only a slight exaggeration of an already impressive academic performance... and it was wonderful to see how proud of him she was when he showed it to her.) Returning to his reflections about the birthday present, he settles upon a portrait of his mother standing in front of their house holding his hand. (He decides not to clutter up the composition by including any other family members in the picture – especially his sister.) He's determined that this portrait must be his best work ever, and that for a picture of this importance, crayons just aren't good enough. Now is the time to break out the oil painting kit that has been sitting for ages at the back of his closet.

He gathers up his materials, and carries them into the dining room, where there's plenty of room to spread them out on the table, and where the atmosphere seems equal to the dignity of the occasion. After struggling for a while to master the new medium, he manages to get a

good deal of paint onto the paper, and is pleased with the result. He finishes by adding his own name in inch-high red letters in the lower right hand corner: “A D A M.”

Adam has been so involved in his work, that he hasn't noticed that much of his paint has ended up on the dining room chairs, and the wallpaper, and especially on the Irish linen tablecloth that has been passed down to his mother through more than a few generations. Adam *can't wait* to see the expression on his mother's face when he calls her down to the dining room to receive her present. We too are left to wonder what her reaction will be.

This is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. The better part of the season is already behind us. For thirty-two days now we have, in the words of an old Lenten preface, been striving to “master our sinfulness and conquer our pride” by “self-denial.” And in all likelihood we've made a mess of the attempt. Some of our failures have been caused by forgetfulness – like remembering it's a Friday in Lent *after* we've had a ham sandwich for lunch. Other failures have resulted from a humiliating lack of willpower. We've discovered we're incapable of giving up chocolate, cigarettes, or chewing gum for a holy purpose.

If our failures were limited to such broken resolutions, they would be bad enough, but our broken resolutions point to more serious transgressions. We've engaged in mean-spirited gossip, neglected our work, ignored opportunities to perform simple acts of kindness, or taken pleasure in the suffering and death of our nation's enemies. We've been too busy to pray, too lazy to go to Mass, or too willful to acknowledge we've been wrong. This litany of wrongdoing, which could be extended

forever, can be so discouraging that we're tempted to despair of our attempts to live holy lives.

But *that*, at least, is a temptation we've overcome. Instead of giving up, we're going to Mass today, to lean on each other, and to receive Our Lord in Word and Sacrament. We'll cry out with the psalmist, "Have mercy on me O God...in your compassion wipe out my offense." We'll take comfort from God's promise through Jeremiah to forgive our evildoing and remember our sin no more. And we'll hear in our Gospel about a grain of wheat that will produce fruit only if it falls to the ground and dies.

Each of us is a grain of wheat. If we are self-indulgent and self-protective we will remain just that – a single grain of wheat, and our lives will be sterile and fruitless – producing only the misery we inflict on the people around us. If on the other hand we dare to die to ourselves and live for others, our lives will take root and bear fruit. To die to self is a kind of death. And it's hard to die. Our reading from Hebrews reminds us that Our Lord himself "offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death." Yet, in an act of profound trust *in* and love *for* his Father he was obedient.

Modeling ourselves on Christ, we are called to make the same choice. It's a choice that can only be motivated by love. And from the moment we make it, our life will be an expression of love – for God and for our neighbor. We will still make mistakes. We will still sin. And our failures will still have destructive consequences. But our failures will take place in the context of an act of love, and as such our lives will be acceptable to God who *is* Love. God will forgive our evildoing and remember our sin no more. Remember young Adam. He was far from

perfect, and he made a terrible mess of things. The damage he caused might break his mother's heart. But we hope she will see that what he did was motivated by love for her, and that she will forgive him and accept his gift. That will *certainly* be God's response to *our* poor efforts, if we make of our lives a portrait, however inadequate, of God's love for us and the love we long to offer in return.