

Welcome, everyone, as we continue to celebrate the Easter season and Christ's resurrection. I especially want to welcome any visitors we have with us here today, whether it's your first time here, or your first time in a long time. We're not really concerned about what path you've walked that has brought you here today; we simply rejoice that we are here together, to worship God as one people. Please know that you belong here, and are always welcome.

In this gospel passage, we receive the account of our Lord giving Peter a second chance. Peter had denied three times that he was even a companion of Jesus, just as Jesus had predicted that he would. Now, after the Resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, and Peter earnestly professes that he does. Jesus does not shame Peter by bringing up his three denials or chide him for his weakness. He simply offers him his mercy. "Do you love me? Yes, Lord, I do." We no doubt would have received a similar account of our Lord giving Judas a second chance, an opportunity to make amends for his betrayal and confess Jesus as Lord, if Judas had only given him a chance to show him that mercy.

But we notice that Jesus does not say to Peter, "Ok, good, that's all I needed to hear. I just wanted to hear you say that you love me." Peter is reconciled to our Lord, he is invited to leave his sins in the past, but in order to do that, he must move forward. So Jesus points to the future: "Feed my sheep. You say that you love me, and that's good, I believe you. Now show me. Feed my sheep."

Jesus is telling Peter that loving God is not just something that we say, it is something that we do. “If you love me, then feed my sheep.” In John’s first letter, he points out that anyone can say they love God. But if you say you love God but hate your neighbor, then you really don’t love God, you’re just saying the words. We must do more than just say the words.

We see Peter and the other apostles put their love of God into action in our first reading. The Sanhedrin order them to stop teaching in the name of Jesus. But teaching in the name of Jesus is exactly what Jesus meant when he told Peter to feed his sheep. “Go, feed them, tell them about me, preach in my name.” At daily Mass this morning, we heard the account of the ordination of the first deacons. This ordination was necessary, we are told, because the apostles needed to be able to devote their time to prayer and to preaching in the name of Jesus. Nothing could distract them from this, not even caring for the widows in their community, as noble a purpose as that was. Jesus commanded Peter to feed his sheep, and that meant spreading the good news, even in the face of persecution. We see eventually that the apostles are flogged, put into prison, and ultimately martyred because of their teaching.

St. Peter and the others were showing us what it means to be a true disciple of Christ. Jesus tells us that to be his disciple, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. In the courtyard, during Jesus’ trial, Peter did the opposite.

He did not deny himself, accept a cross next to Jesus and follow him on the path to Calvary; he denied Jesus, ran away from the cross and from the path that Jesus would walk.

We, too, are called to not only say that we are disciples of Christ and love God, but to prove that love with our actions. Just as the apostles were told to keep their faith to themselves or be punished, we also are often times pressured to keep our faith to ourselves. “Faith is a private matter. You can believe what you want, if you must, but keep it out of the public square, and don’t you dare be so bold as to bring it up in public debate and allow it to influence secular society.”

We can see this mindset in action when we hear politicians say that they are personally opposed to abortion, for example, but they don’t allow that to affect their public policy. Or when parents are told by the public education system that they must submit their children to teachings on sexuality that are contrary to the moral order because the State knows better than the parents what is good for their children.

Standing up for our faith in situations like these is to open ourselves up to persecution. We have two choices. We can deny ourselves and our own comfort and perhaps our status in the world, or we can deny our faith, deny our Lord. We can remain silent and be like the pre-resurrection Peter, who said to Jesus that he

would never deny him but then did just that in the face of persecution. Or we can stand up for our faith, we can back up our words with our actions, and rejoice that we have been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus' name. That is such an important phrase that we get from our first reading: to be worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus' name. When we are dismissed, or mistreated, or held in disdain because we stubbornly follow our Lord and his teachings and refuse to give in to the pressures of our culture, we are blessed, because we have been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus' name. Our Lord suffered persecution for his teaching when he was on earth, so we can expect the same.

Of course, that's never easy. Being a disciple of Christ, going where he went, is hard. There will be times when we take the easy way out and remain silent.

Fortunately, our Lord is merciful. When Peter realized what he had done, he wept bitterly, and gratefully accepted the second chance our Lord gave him, and went out and proved his love for him. When we realize that we remained silent when we were called to speak, our Lord offers us that same mercy. We too must simply repent, confess our sins and receive forgiveness, and then look forward, look forward and prepare ourselves to next time answer with our actions when Jesus call us by name and asks us, "Do you love me?"