

Some time ago I was out in the plaza after a Sunday mass and all these little kids were running around, playing. Then suddenly, out of this cyclone of children a small boy, maybe three-years old, ran up to me. He silently stuck out one of his feet to me. The shoelace was untied. His attitude was one of assumed trust and expectation. He expected me to tie his shoelace. That's just what adults do in his world. That's part of what they are for. I felt somewhere in between his parent and his servant. So, naturally, I bent down and tied his shoelace. Without a word the boy ran and rejoined the play.

Now, those of you with small children probably find this incident a common one, but it made me smile and think. I suppose if it happens all the time, it may be a chore, but for me it was actually a pleasure to bend down and meet this child's expectations and need. I mention it today because I saw in the incident an analogy for the attitude God the Father wants us to have towards Him, and what John the Baptist is trying to get across in the Gospel. We are to turn to God in expectant

trust that He can do what we cannot and can change us as we can't change ourselves.

The people at the Jordan ask John the Baptist, "What should we do?" He answers some of them, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none." To the Tax Collectors, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." To the soldiers, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone." In other words, change! Share your wealth, be honest, don't be greedy or violent. And just before this passage John had told those same people, "Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance." Today I want to preach about just how we are to produce this fruit, because it's easy to say, but hard to do.

We need God's grace. Sometimes we think of the virtues we practice as earning God's grace and salvation. But it's more the other way around. Our faith and relationship with Jesus result in the Holy Spirit living in us, and it is through His power that the virtues well up in us and overflow into our fruitful behavior towards others: or don't!

So, what are these fruit? There is a partial list of them for us in Galatians 5: 19-23. There's the bad fruit, fruit of the flesh, he lists: immorality, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of anger, acts of selfishness, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, among others. But, Paul says, "In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

What Paul's saying is that, if we are growing in closeness to Jesus the Holy Spirit will move into our lives more deeply and produce His fruit, that is, change our behavior by influencing our words and actions towards our spouse, kids, co-workers, neighbors, anonymous drivers on the freeway. When we allow the Holy Spirit this greater space, He produces love, kindness, generosity, patience, etc. in us. The virtues are clear signs of the working of the Holy Spirit.

We can't produce much good fruit on our own. Going back to my story about the little boy with the untied shoelace . . . we might think

the analogy is a poor one because in time we should all learn to tie our own shoelaces, which seems to suggest that as we grow up, we also should need God's help less? Well, that is how we tend to live. We think we can do it all ourselves. And that works with shoelaces and other worldly skills. But when it comes to holiness it's a different story. We assume that if we only try hard enough, we can avoid sin and become patient, kind, selfless, generous, chaste, peaceful.

So, how's that going for you? The truth is we usually fail when we try to live the virtues by our own power. We can't do it ourselves. We need a Father to bend down and do these things for us – by doing them in us. And that means we need the humility to ask for God's help. How?

Remember, John the Baptist tells the people that he will baptize in water, but Jesus will baptize us in fire and the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who will do it all for us – if we let Him. Whenever the Bible talks about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, as it does in this passage, it always means a new unleashing of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

That was the point behind Fr. Dave Pavonka's talks. And that is why I brought the Life in the Spirit Seminar to Holy Family a few months ago, so we could start to open up to what John the Baptist promised in this Gospel. He means those words for us too, because that is what we need if we are to become as grace-filled as Jesus wants us to be.

I think sometimes people have a vision of holiness that is sad, boring, and impossible. But holiness is nothing more or less than being filled with God's very life. And that divine life produces in our lives those good fruit – joy, love, kindness, peace!

One prayer that we can all say to help receive this growth is, "Come Holy Spirit!" It's a simple prayer. It's not magic. But it expresses the desire for the more that we all need: more joy, more virtue, more God. Try repeating this prayer many times a day, softly to yourself, perhaps more loudly in our prayer groups.

Something else you might do to deepen your relationship with the Holy Spirit is to attend the "Called and Gifted Workshop" on Saturday,

January 19 from 9:30 – 4:30. You received gifts from the Holy Spirit at your baptism and confirmation. God wants to use those to extend His love to others through you. At the workshop you can begin to discover, discern and develop the personal gifts the Holy Spirit has given to you. Informational cards about the workshop will be distributed after mass.

Jesus has come to bring a baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist says so. Let Him do it. Ask for the Spirit's power to change you as only He can. Stick out your foot and let Him tie your shoelaces!