

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2018
Fr. Michael Renninger

I wasn't expecting the question.

We had been sitting at the table for over an hour, catching up with each other, sharing news.

The food was great. The conversation was even better.

And then he looked across the table and asked me, "So, when did you fall in love?"

Priests don't often get that question! I must have had a quizzical look on my face, so he asked again: "So, when did you fall in love... *with Jesus?*"

Now, people ask me lots of questions about *religion*. They ask me WHY I believe in God, or WHY I became a priest, or WHY does the Church teach such and such. I get lots of questions about RELIGION.

But, rarely does someone ask me, "When did you fall in love with Jesus?" Now, the friend with whom I was having dinner knows me well, and loves me well. And he asks me very good questions.

So, I answered him. When did it happen? I fell in love with Jesus in 1990. And where did it happen. It happened in... Petersburg, VA. I had come to Virginia to be a seminarian for the diocese of Richmond. I had previously spent four years in a monastery. I knew how to pray *there*. But now I was in a parish in Petersburg. Doing ministry I had never done before, working with parishioners I had never met before.

And I started to fall in love. I had the opportunity to preach – so I had to spend time in prayer, or I would have nothing to say when I preached. I met faith-filled men and women who were so generous in giving their time and talent and treasure to their parish – and they spoke so personally about Christ. I met people who had suffered greatly in their lives – but they were full of hope and peace, because they were absolutely convinced that Jesus was with them each day.

So I prayed. And I listened. And I learned. And I worked. And in the midst of all of that, I met Him...I met him whom my heart desires. Up to that point in my life, I knew ABOUT Jesus. But in 1990 I met Jesus in a brand new way. And I fell in love.

And let's be clear – I fell in love, because He loved me first. In Petersburg, in 1990 – I finally

shut up long enough to learn how to listen. And I began to hear what Jesus was trying to say to me. He was saying: “I love you. I know you better than you know yourself. I know all your secrets. I know what your insecurities are. And guess what Mike – I know all of it, and I love you. And nothing will change my love for you.”

I fell in love with Jesus...Jesus who knows me best, and loves me best, and strengthens me best, and forgives me best, and fulfills me best.

I remember where & when I met him – Petersburg, 1990 – it was there that I fell in love.

The demon in today’s Gospel will *also* remember where and when HE met Jesus. It was Capernaum. In the synagogue. Just shortly after Jesus started his public ministry.

This unclean spirit had taken control of the man in the synagogue. And right there, in the synagogue of Capernaum, the unclean spirit meets Jesus (by that way – that synagogue is still there. And archeologists tell us that the stones on the floor of that synagogue were there when Jesus taught and healed in that synagogue. It’s an amazing thing – to be able to touch the stones which Jesus’ own feet had touched).

The evil spirit tries all kinds of tricks to deflect the power of Jesus. The spirit says, “I know who you are. You are the holy one of God.” During the days of Jesus, there was a superstitious belief that if you knew someone’s true identity, and said it out loud, then you would have power over them. It’s kind of like the tension in the Superman movies. If someone finally figures out that Superman is Clark Kent, then they could control Superman by threatening to reveal his true identity.

So the demon says: “I know who you are! You are the Holy One of God!”

And Jesus simply says: “Quiet. Come out of him.” And the spirit *has* to obey. No spiritual trick can control Jesus. The unclean spirit has met Jesus – met God - in Capernaum.

Now, pay attention to what happens there in Capernaum. The power of Jesus’ love forces the destructive, unclean spirit to flee. The *more* Jesus is present, the *less* room there is for what can hurt us. The more we are in touch with Jesus’ love for us – there will be less and less room for the destructive things which try to control us.

Throughout the rest of Mark’s Gospel, we will see this same truth demonstrated again and again. Wherever Jesus goes, there is less and less room for evil. Wherever he loves, there is less room for hate. Wherever he forgives, there is less room for anger. Wherever he leads, there is less chance for people to get lost. Jesus even goes into the tomb – and then there is no room for

death!

Now, I am *not* saying that if we fall in love with Jesus, then everything in our lives will be easy, and we will never sin, or never be hurt. In today's 2nd reading, Saint Paul makes it clear – whether you are married or single, you will always have *something* to be anxious about!

But in my experience, there is *less room* in my life for the things that tear me down, if I give *more room* in my heart for Jesus. The more I love *him*, the less apt I am to love what is bad for me. The more I love *him*, the less apt I am to be selfish. The more I love *him*, the less apt I am to be afraid, to be ashamed, to be untrue.

The more I love *him*, the less apt I am to be hopeless, or impatient, or controlled by anger. The more deeply I fall in love with *him*, the more deeply I learn to love and serve others. The more I love *him*, the more he will teach me how to be a person of integrity, and justice, and compassion.

The more he fills me with his love, the less desperate I am to fill that void with something else.

2000 years of Christian experience tells us that the path to loving Christ, and being loved by him, is not a secret one. How do we get in touch with him? Be silent. Turn off the phone and the TV and the iPod. Be quiet.

Then talk to him as you would your best friend. Find out as much as you can about this man, Jesus, whom we love, by reading the Gospel, and learning your faith. Then rub elbows with your brothers and sisters in Christ, by working together in the church to make the world a better place. And in every person you meet, remember that Christ is within them, loving *them*, loving *you*.

If someone asked you at the dinner table, “when did you fall in love with Jesus?”, how would you answer? And if you're not sure what your answer would be, maybe you could ask yourself a different question: “when have you experienced his love? When have you felt loved by him? When have you had an inkling that you were touching the mystery that none of us can fully see or explain?”

It's never too late to start. We have a lifetime to fall in love. And we have *this* meal, this Eucharist, in which we can recall how he has loved us, and simply say, “thank you.”