

Rev. Jeff Nicolas
Acts 1:12-14
1 Peter 4:13-16
John 17:1-11a

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
June 4-5, 2011

Happy Birthday Epiphany! It's been 40 years since then Archbishop McDonough called in two priests and said, "Listen, I'm going to give you charge over 19 acres way out in the sticks to carry on Jesus' mission." And 40 years later, three Archbishops later, six pastors later, the mission continues. Bravo. Bravo. Give yourself a hand.

The inspirations for my homilies sometimes even surprise me. And the thing that has been on my head ever since I began preparing for the homily on this Ascension Sunday, as well as our 40th anniversary, and in addition to that having found out I'm being moved to the Cathedral, all of that in my head and I just simply had a song in my head the whole time. Which actually made it kind of difficult to create a homily. Normally they're Broadway songs, but this time it was a different song.

Perhaps you remember this. It comes from a cartoon that I saw when I was a little kid. The name of the cartoon was "A Christmas Without Santa Claus." Do you remember that one? It was a Rudolph one. It was like the second one after the original Rudolph. What it was basically...I think there was a dentist involved, and Rudolph. And they go around trying to save Christmas. The big problem is someone has hijacked Christmas. Well remember in the middle of that cartoon there's a little song and it sounds like this. (Fr. Jeff hums a song.) That has been in my head for two weeks now. It's the Snow Miser and the Heat Miser, right? Remember that? And one of them is "I'm Mr. Heat Miser, I am the one. I'm Mr. Heat Miser, I'm one hundred and one." Something like that.

So you have one brother, that's the Heat Miser; and his twin brother is the Cold Miser. Remember that? I remember as a kid watching that thinking they look exactly the same. And then you find out they're twins, and they're both sons of Mother Nature. The way the whole cartoon kind of comes to a happy conclusion is when those twins actually stop fighting with each other and work together. Remember that? And Christmas is saved.

Now that has been on my head for two weeks. But with that song and that cartoon in my head, coupled with today's gospel of the Ascension, it really strikes me that there are actually two forces at work here at Epiphany, that have been at work here at Epiphany for all 40 years of our existence. Two forces that are symbolized by "water" and "fire." And our liturgy today, you will note, is filled with both. Those flaming pots of fire and the water sprinkled upon us.

Now on your right, we have water. Our pool of baptism. The origins of our being grafted to the mission of Christ, the Body of Christ the church. The water symbolizes the call for unity, that sense of belonging, and belonging not simply to ourselves, but belonging to something larger than ourselves. That we are a parish as a part of the church universal throughout the world. Water.

And on your left, fire. Our Paschal candle. The symbol of Christ's triumph over darkness and sin. It symbolizes for us the charisms that we each have by the Spirit's power. It represents for us that uniqueness that each one of us baptized becomes a channel, a unique channel of God's grace into the world that will never be repeated again. It symbolizes the diversity of all the gifts of the Spirit gathered into our body.

The challenge of the water is that we cannot compromise truth. The challenge of the fire is that we cannot undermine freedom.

As I have been reflecting over these last few weeks on my time here at Epiphany as the sixth pastor of Epiphany over these last five years, it strikes me that I'm delivering this homily in just the right place – right between the water and the fire. Because actually it is the lot of the pastor to exist in the middle between the water and the fire. It is the pastor's unique role, as I've been reflecting on it over these last few weeks, it's the pastor's unique role to lead communities of faith to a balance. A place where water and fire can come together.

Now how any given pastor plays out this role becomes rather unique both to the person of the pastor and each parish situation. No two situations are the same, and no two pastors are the same. As I've been reflecting over these weeks, Epiphany is my third experience of pasturing. My first was actually down in Meridian, Mississippi on the naval base there. A little chapel. A chapel called St. Joseph of Cupertino Chapel, the patron saint of passengers on planes. In case anyone is traveling soon, remember that. Joseph of Cupertino protect us.

But I remember when I got there; it was a military base, military people. They had no problem with the water. The problem there was that there were no ministries. There was nothing...no council, no religious ed. And so for the two years that I had there, basically I got to pastor calling out these gifts, and this fire, and getting all these programs going. And we found that it developed this marvelous little community. And I'll never forget my time there, because I only had one mass on Sunday. That was it. That was nice.

My second pastorate, I was on the other side of town. I was at St. Lawrence. And there they had water and fire. And the part of the fire that I got to pastor and call out a bit was creating a brand new school situation that had never been done before. Notre Dame Academy that, I'm quite proud to say, continues to be quite the success today among those schools.

And then my last five years have been here with you as pastor of Epiphany community. A privilege to be able to walk with you these past five years.

But the combination of fire and water here was different, as every parish situation is different. And here I found that the role I needed to play more here was less fire and more water. Kind of calling us to remember that we're a part of something larger than ourselves. That we are partners in mission with the larger church.

Last Ash Wednesday, if you went to the evening service, you saw me do this liturgical dance. And I've had so many people say to me, wow Fr. Jeff. That was powerful. It was so moving to see you do that. I'm glad you finally became comfortable enough to be with us in that way. But here's the thing. That wasn't a stretch for me. It never was. I've come from places where I was the one getting people to do liturgical dance. I've always loved liturgical dance. To me, if St. Cecilia says that singing is praying twice, well I think liturgical dance is praying three times! It's that powerful I think. It wasn't a stretch at all for me. I absolutely delighted doing it.

But I can tell you over these last couple of weeks, I found that one of the things that I personally am grieving as I leave Epiphany for the Cathedral is that I was only just beginning to get invited to share with you more of my "fire" side. It's there. But in any given situation, a pastor needs to be what he needs to be for the good of the place. During my five years here, I discovered through the power of group wisdom, which I always knew about but I've grown to even a deeper level of appreciate for it, but through group wisdom I discovered with you the power of

conversation. Which is the means by which water and fire can be brought together.

It's not easy. Conversation is very difficult. We see in civil society that it's almost like a lost art form. We see in our politics that they seem to have forgotten the importance of it. And everything just seems to get more and more polarized, but conversation, and its power, is to reverse polarization and to bring together, to fulfill Jesus' parting prayer to the Father that they be one. Conversation is not easy. And as we engaged in conversation over these last five years, I know that some came to believe that to even enter into conversation was to betray a principle – truth or freedom – depending on whether you were coming from the water or from the fire. And a strong temptation exists, the strongest temptation, against conversation and its power is the temptation to pull away altogether, to hibernate, so to speak.

Yet, think about it. Water, when it's pulled away from the stream, becomes stagnant and dead. Fire, a flame, when pulled away from the hearth, grows cold. But when through the hard work of conversation, water and fire come together, we get steam, STEAM, propulsion, energy, power, drive, mission. I applaud all who entered into our conversations over these past five years and remained at our table. Together we grew more into the beloved community we aspire to be, that 40 years ago we were created to become. And my friends, the larger church was watching.

I believe that our conversations and how we came to those conversations over these last five years have actually inspired in part next week's presbyteral assembly up at St. Meinrad, where all the priests of the archdiocese will get together for a week of study, as together we begin, as a presbyterate, to examine the art and the craft of conversation in parish leadership. You see, as I said in my very first homily here at Epiphany, the larger church needs an Epiphany. And we of Epiphany are influencing and having an effect on the larger church through our witness of how we are church together, how we bring water and fire together.

Bringing water and fire together is never easy. But Jesus has faith in us. It is this faith that Jesus has in us that we celebrate on this Feast of the Ascension, because the Ascension is not about what most of scripture is about, our believing in Jesus. No, the Ascension is about Jesus believing in us. And entrusting to us his mission.

Now, especially when we're faced with the hard work of conversation, and the hard work of trying to bring water and fire together, the hard work of actually being a beloved community when we're faced with that and the struggles and the

heartaches that come with that, and all the sweat and blood and tears that come with that, we can be very tempted to doubt. And that doubt, my friends, is the same doubt that the apostles had, the eleven on that mountaintop that we hear about in scripture today. When the scripture says they saw Jesus, but they doubted, they weren't doubting his resurrection. They'd seen him several times after that. And they certainly weren't doubting that he was the Son of God. As scripture says today, "they worshipped him." No, what they were doubting was themselves. They knew that he was entrusting into their hands his great mission, and they doubted. And Jesus' response: "I will be with you to help you until the end." I will be with you to help you. And I will send an advocate, the power of the Spirit, to guide you.

That Spirit of God is with us. The mission of Jesus continues to be entrusted to us. And as I said my first preaching, I'll say again now, the larger church needs an Epiphany. May Epiphany parish continue to grow more and more into the beloved community of water and fire. May the steam that we produce bring glory to God.

Now stand up. I have some water questions for you.

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?

Do you believe in his only Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, descended to the dead, rose to the right hand of the Father where he continues to intercede for the church?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?

This is our faith. This is the faith of the church. We are proud to profess it through Christ Jesus, Our Lord. Amen.

Now, let's take the flame of our charisms and the fire of the Spirit, and bring prayers and petitions before our God.