

Saints Peter and Paul (June 29, 2008)

These two flawed men, flawed just as you and I are flawed, became two of the greatest saints of the church. One of Paul's sayings from the Letter to the Romans is appropriate here. He laments in Chapter 7, "The good that I want to do I do not do, and the evil that I want to avoid is what I find myself doing." Paul feels within himself a tension that I think that we all feel at times between the good that we want to do and our weak human nature that keeps pushing us to something less good or even something sinful. And he goes on to shout almost in despair, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" But then in a great act of faith and confidence he says, "Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord." That's how he is saved. That's how we are all saved, through Christ Jesus our Lord.

And you know it's not just Paul or each of us as individuals who feels this tension. The same experience has been in the Church as a community right from the beginning. There have been factions, disputes, divisions, scandals, through the centuries and even in our own time. But Paul again in his first letter to the Corinthians chastises the community for its divisions especially between rich and poor – no surprise there – and urging them to patch up their differences before they come to the Eucharist which is the sacrament of unity, not of division. He might well be talking to us today.

One of the great tensions we can't help but feel is between the Gospel values we hear preached in our churches and the way of the world we live in. Ronald Rolheiser, a contemporary spiritual writer, who spoke here a couple of weeks ago, talks about this kind of tension in a recent article. He says:

"To try to serve others is to be caught up in many tensions. . . . How can we remain energized, effective, and true? Here are some guidelines: Walk a fine tightrope. Take your stand with the marginalized, even as you are known for your sanity and capacity to relate warmly and deeply to every kind of person and group. Lead without being elitist. Be led by the artist but listen to the street. Don't be afraid to smash idols and don't be afraid to bow in reverence. The problem is that the pious aren't liberal and the

liberals aren't pious. Be both, one doesn't work without the other. Great hearts hold near contradictory principles, lesser ones do not. Help smash the false gods that need to be smashed, even as you are unafraid to kneel in reverence. Be equally committed to social justice and to intimacy with Jesus. Go into dark places but don't sin. Stand up for the God-given freedom we enjoy, even as you model and show others how that freedom can be carried in a way that never abuses it. Like Jesus who went into the singles bars of his time, walk a great freedom, go into dark places, but go there not to assert human autonomy, but to take God's light there."

Today we celebrate two men who knew what it meant to live in those tensions, to live like the one who had called them, Jesus their Lord. We celebrate the fidelity of these two men, sinners like all of us. Initially they were both found wanting. When they repented, they were forgiven by God and by the Church. Though they were victims of persecution, their commitment to Christ and to the Church made them heroes. Their victory is evidence that the gates of hell shall not prevail. It was true in their time and it is true in ours as well.