

October 11, 2008
Hispanic Liturgy Day
St. James Cathedral, Chicago

One of the only claims to fame that I might have is that I used to be Bill Gates' priest. Well, it would be more accurate to say that if Bill Gates had a priest, that would have been me. The parish I served in Seattle had a school and the Gates' children attended it. One morning, shortly after I arrived at St. Thomas, I stepped out of my office to go across to the church to lead morning chapel for the children. I literally bumped into a man in glasses and a little boy going into church and after we jostled each other for a minute I had the odd feeling I knew him. Now this was strange because I had just arrived at the parish and I hardly knew anyone. It took me a couple of minutes to realize, "Oh yeah – I do know that guy. It's Bill Gates."

I was thinking about all this yesterday when I read that Bill Gates is no longer listed as the richest man in America. Poor guy. He's now number two, behind Warren Buffett. I wonder if it bothers him. I think the magazine that keeps track of all this might want us to think that it does. We love to keep score. We live in a world where (even with the stock market's roller coaster ride) people are put into categories like: the richest, the most beautiful, the sexiest, the most popular, the most valuable player and on and on. Look at any popular magazine cover and you'll see the story the world tells about who is valuable and who isn't.

Today we gather to celebrate confirmation. But what is it really that we are here to do? Why come to spend a beautiful fall day inside instead of the million other things we might be doing this morning? Why are we here? I believe we're here to say who we are and to say in no uncertain terms who we are not. We're here to unmask the lies the world tells about us and about human worth. We're here to tell the truth and to commit ourselves to make the truth a reality in the lives of other people.

We're here, we gather to be once more what God has already created us to be. We gather to be recreated as the Body of his son, Jesus Christ. In Holy Baptism, God makes us his own children, makes us into the Body of Christ. I like to say that at every baptism we come to a pool of water to wash away the disguise the world wants us to wear. The false identity that it's who you know, what you know, how much you make, how good looking you are, how young you can stay – that it's all those things that make you and me valuable. And that, dear friends, is a lie. Baptism reveals the truth underneath all that. Baptism tells us that you and I and every man, woman or child who lives is of infinite value for one reason and one reason only: God loves us. God loves us enough to create us in the first place, God loves us enough never ever to leave us alone in trouble or fear, God loves us enough to die for us so that we might never have to fear anything, not ultimately, not even death.

That is the faith of the church, the faith of the followers of Jesus. It's not at all obvious, not when you look at Wall Street or watch the nightly news. It wasn't obvious in the time of Jesus' first friends either. That man from the Ethiopian royal court riding along in his chariot was having a hard time understanding it – he was trying, he knew the money and power and status he

enjoyed wasn't enough to make him happy, it would never fulfill him completely. He had come to Jerusalem hoping perhaps to find something in the worship of Israel that might satisfy his deepest longings. He was probably what would have been known as a "God-fearer," someone who was not quite a Jew and never would be, not one of God's covenant people, but a seeker, someone who recognized that the God of Israel was the only God worth knowing and following.

He was trying to understand, but it wasn't until Philip came up along side of him and explained the story of Jesus, not until then did he really get it. And then – what a wonder – not only did he begin to understand who Jesus was and what Jesus revealed about God, it began to dawn on him that God loved even him. That God loved and accepted even him. "Here is water," he said, "Why not baptize me right now?" And so he was and his disguise was washed away and as he looked into that pool he saw the truth: looking back at him was not a perplexed, worried government official. Looking back at him was a child of God.

Confirmation is the renewal of baptismal vows, the promise once again to be the people God calls us to be. Each one of us who has been baptized has looked into that pool of water and the reflection looking back at us is the one God sees. Each one of us is an infinitely loved son or daughter of God. When God looks at you or me God sees us as we really are. God sees his son, his daughter. Sometimes baptism is called "christening." That's because we anoint people when they're baptized, we sign them with holy oil in the sign of the cross. The word Christ means, "Anointed One." Christ is not Jesus' last name; it is a title saying that he is the Anointed One, the Messiah, the one who shows us the truth about God and ourselves. When we baptize some we make them new Christs, new anointed ones, reborn in the image of Jesus himself.

And as members of Christ's Body, as anointed ones, we promise to live more and more like the Jesus we follow. We promise to act in ways that will make the Good News of God's love more and more real for people in this world who cannot believe they are worthy of being loved. "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?" we ask. Will you work for justice and peace among all people? Will you proclaim by word and example the good news? In other words, we all get to be Philip. All of us, this morning, in this liturgy, promise to come alongside others to show them the truth about themselves too. We promise to help them wash away the disguise of the world too. Jesus is here with us. And his words are for us: "I am with you. Go and be good news for the world." Now more than ever my friends, let us do as Jesus asks.