

Second Sunday of Lent
St. Mary's Church
Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

A glass of wine. Figs stuffed with goat cheese. Melon wrapped with prosciutto. That's what was on the table, as I sat in the Napa Valley several years ago. I was enjoying a great vacation. And as I sat there, sipping a glass of wine, this is what I thought:

Why can't life be like this all the time?
What would it be like to win the mega millions lottery, and simply travel all over the world, eating melon and prosciutto?
Wouldn't it be nice if Warren Buffet had left all of his money to me?

Basically, I was thinking: "Vacation is over – and I really don't want to go back to the real world."

Do you ever have those thoughts? When you were a kid, did you lay awake in August, wondering how it was possible that you had to go back to school in just a few days? Or, have you ever been to the beach, on the last day of vacation, saying a silent prayer to God: "Why does vacation have to end?"

In a phone call, I told my mother about these thoughts, and she asked me, "Why don't you want to go back to work?" And I said, "Oh, I love being a priest. But many days I don't really like committee meetings, paperwork, 400 emails." She said to me, "Well....get over it! Life is hard. And REAL life is not what happens when you are on vacation. REAL life is what happens day to day, year to year." She said, "when you are a parent, there are moments of absolute joy: the day your child is born; the day they say their first word. Those are the highlights, and you treasure

them. But, most days, being a parent means that you wake up early, make the peanut butter sandwich to put in the lunch bag, pay the bills, and do what needs to be done. You can't sit around whining that parenting isn't a joy all the time – you just have to get up, and make the sandwich, because that is what real love looks like.”

In today's Gospel passage, we catch a glimpse of what real love, God's love, looks like. In the paragraphs leading up to this scene, Jesus told his disciples that they must pick up their cross each day if they want to be his followers.

It is in that context that Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain. There, Jesus is 'transfigured' before their eyes. Luke says that Jesus began to shine with a full glory; his clothes became dazzlingly white; heavenly conversationalist began to speak to Jesus. Something wonderful took place there, and the disciples caught a glimpse of what Jesus would look like in the fullness of the resurrection. It was wonderful.

Peter thinks it's wonderful, so he blurts out: “let's build some tents! Let's start setting up camp up here.” In other words, Peter is basically saying, “I want to stay up here, where Jesus is glowing, where God's voice is heard directly, and where everything is shining.”

But you can't stay on the mountain. You can't stay in the shiny stuff. Life and love are not real if they always feel easy and glorious. You have to come down off the mountain and make the peanut butter sandwiches, because THAT is where life and love are real.

The voice of God booms from the heavens, saying to Peter and the others: “This is my son, listen to him.” And what had Jesus just said to them? “You must pick up your cross each day, if you want

to follow me.” Listen to THAT. Jesus leads them down the mountain, away from the shiny stuff, back to where love is not always easy, and faith takes work.

We NEED the mountaintop, but we do not live there. Each of us has had moments in our lives when we sense and know the presence of God in unique ways. We KNOW when we are standing in the middle of the mystery, and it is great. But, if we want Christian faith to always feel like that, we will be disappointed. Because we have to pick up the cross, come down the mountain, and live our faith in the daily life where it ain't easy. Most of our life as Christian disciples is not lived in the moments of shining mystery – it is lived in the daily decisions - to pray, even though prayer is hard; to forgive, even though forgiveness takes work; to serve, even when it would be so easy not to; we come off the mountain, we stay faithful to our promises, even when we feel like we are the ones doing all the giving. We gather together as Catholic people each week, and in the celebration of the Eucharist, we have a chance to encounter the Christ who transfigures bread and wine. But we don't live in the middle of the Mass – we live in the middle of the *mess*. We encounter Christ here, but he sends us out there, to live out our faith in our day to day reality.

The same is true in our loving relationships. We need the mountaintop moments of falling in love: the passion; the joy. We delight in the gift of love that happens between human beings: But, if we expect our whole lives to be lived in the honeymoon, we will seek after something that does not exist. Real love, means that you get up, make the sandwiches, pay the bills, fold the laundry, and stay faithful...even when that is hard.

We cannot always be in Napa Valley, eating figs stuffed with goat cheese. No. We Christians gather day after day, Lent after Lent, at the Eucharistic table, where the menu is simple: a bit of bread, a sip of wine. In our gathering, we thank God for those moments of joy

which reveal to us glimpses of heaven. And in this simple food we find Christ, who asks us to pick up the cross, following him down to mountain, back to where life, and love, are real.