

Is there anyone here in the Church that does not like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches? After all, aren't they a staple of life and their own food group just like pizza and barbeque? Who likes their sandwich with heavy P? How about heavy J? How about heavy both? Now that is my kind of people!

What does PB&J have to do with religion, or this Sunday's readings? Deciding how we like our sandwich is an appropriate exercise of free will. Freedom to choose is a gift from God and one of the essential defining characteristics of our humanity. Animals, yes even our beloved pets function, make decisions based on instinct and learned behavior.

As much as I like my dog, he likes me because I feed him, I treat him well and I provide the affection that he craves. The lady who grooms him does the same and he likes and is happy to see her as well. But he isn't free to choose. He can't be bad. The behavior we may call 'bad' is actually the dog responding to instinct that hasn't been curbed by appropriate training. If a dog chews your socks it is because it was bored and you didn't pick up your dirty laundry off the floor and probably gave it a sock to chew as a puppy so now all socks are fair game. In the final analysis, you trained your dog to chew on socks. If a dog wets on the carpet, it is looking for a patch of grass to use and since the owner wasn't paying attention, the carpet is as close as it can come to being outside. It is reacting to instinct.

We on the other hand can choose to be bad. We can also choose to be good. I was listening to a show on EWTN years ago and the priest said something that I have never forgotten. He said; "there were more than two trees in the Garden of Eden." In other words, there were, and still are, many more choices that are, or lead to good than those that are, or lead to evil.

So then, why let us choose? Why not create man so we are hard wired to behave? It is because God made us to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world so we can be happy with him forever in heaven. For love to be true love, it must be freely given. Love is a gift of the Holy Spirit, it is freely given to us, and in order for us to reciprocate, we must be free to return that love to God, or not.

Inevitably, the exercise of our free will in pursuit of the ultimate good, that is God, will involve sacrifice. In the reading from the Second Book of

Maccabees today a Gentile King had conquered Israel and tried to force the Jewish people to give up their faith. Those who did not comply were tortured and put to death. We read about the deaths of the first four of seven sons, as the story continues all seven sons and their mother suffered the same fate; for their faith, their love of God and their hope of everlasting life.

In the proper exercise of their free will, these seven brothers and their mother were able to choose to remain faithful instead of capitulating, even though by renouncing their faith they could avoid torture and continue to live. Christian Martyrs have continued in this same fashion from Saint Stephen to those who are losing their lives because of their belief in Jesus Christ throughout the world today.

There is a harsh, brutal battle, to face death and persevere in faith. However, those of us who continue with our normal lives have our own battles to fight. Satan knows our weaknesses and is more than happy to exploit them. The Martyrs faced temptations up to and including the moment of death. Satan will continue to try to lead us down the path to hell in the same way.

Sounds pretty grim doesn't it? Free will, the danger of bad choices leading us to an evil end, life isn't all PB&J. What can we do to protect ourselves, maybe even to condition, to train ourselves to reject Satan, reject his empty promises and avoid the occasion of sin in our lives?

As I was reflecting on this weekend several things came to mind. First came the big three, prayer, fasting and alms giving. Father and I beat that drum at least once a month for several reasons, not the least of which is that they are so effective in helping us to avoid evil. On this weekend I want to add a personal observation to the big three.

Sacrifice. Every Saint I have studied, every person I have ever known who is truly happy, they all lead or lead lives of sacrifice. They habitually step outside of their comfort zone to help other people. It usually isn't anything big, but they go beyond simple courtesy to make people feel comfortable in their presence. They always seem to have time for someone's crisis of the day even if it is just to listen to their lament. They keep a few dollars in their pocket for the homeless, they volunteer in hundreds of different places and ways, and we never hear about them. In living that quiet life of sacrifice, they live a life of sacrificial love and in living that life they are the happiest people I know.

This Monday, at the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month we will celebrate 100 years since the guns fell silent marking the end of World War I. Since 1954 we have celebrated this day as Veterans' Day, honoring all of those who are and have served in the military for the defense of our great nation.

Most don't join for a noble purpose, I know that I joined because I was \$5.00 from being dead broke, my rent was due and I didn't, and obviously still don't like going hungry. I figured that I would have 3 hots and a cot and after 3 years I would have the GI Bill and a chance at a good life. The Vietnam War was winding down but that didn't even enter into the equation. I'm willing to bet that my story isn't unique.

Even though it wasn't and probably still isn't the primary motivating factor for most, every Veteran makes a commitment to place themselves between those in the world who would do us harm and our nation. A commitment to defend even those who mock us, who would call us fools for what we do. Peace or war, the military is a hazardous profession and brave men and women risk life and limb on a regular basis in service to our nation.

Being a Veteran doesn't necessarily make you a good person. It doesn't guarantee success in life. It does mean that that person has learned the true meaning of sacrifice. In that sacrifice, in that appropriate exercise of their free will, the Veteran lays their life at the foot of the Cross in the defense of others for God to do with what he wills. In that act of selfless sacrifice, God knows the Veteran and hopefully the Veteran comes to know God.