

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

September 7, 2014

INTRODUCTION - (*Ezekiel 33, 7-9*) (*Romans 13, 8-10*) (*Matthew 18, 15-20*) Our first reading takes us back six hundred years before Christ as God explains to his prophet Ezekiel his responsibility as a prophet. Ezekiel must warn God's people of their sinful ways or Ezekiel himself will be held accountable. It is a prelude to the gospel where Jesus instructs his followers how to help each other stay on the right track. St. Paul's teaching on love in our second reading reminds us that if we should try to correct one another, it should be done out of love.

HOMILY – I want to tell you a little story. A lady I know, I will call her Agnes, is a loving mother and grandmother. She has a friend who has been alienated from some of her family for a long time. Since Agnes' own family is very close to each other, Agnes made a decision, hoping that alienation or separation would never be part of her own family. In addition to praying for her family, which she always did, she approached one of her adult grandchildren who was highly respected by the other family members. Agnes asked him to be the mediator for any problems that might arise in the future. If ever there was a chance people would become alienated from one another, or there would be fighting or hatred among family members, he would step in. Agnes went so far as to instruct him in what to say. "Tell them I put you in charge of keeping the family together and to straighten things out. You are in charge." It was a heavy responsibility for him to accept, but because he loved his grandmother, he promised to do as she asked. Grandmother, who is dearly loved and respected by her family, is also very wise. It gave her peace, knowing that when she had passed on, someone will be watching out for the family and helping to keep them together. She took the burden off her grandson, so that if he does try to deal with some sensitive family issues, he won't be rejected for sticking his nose in someone else's business. He can say "Grandma left me in charge of helping to keep our family united."

Jesus is very wise too. He is telling his followers that same thing in today's gospel: "I want you to be in charge of straightening things out when there are problems and disagreements and fights and when people make up their own rules that lead my followers into separation and disunity." We, you and I and the rest of the Church, who have been put in charge have done a far from perfect job in this regard with so much division among Christ's followers. In theological language we refer to this as "fraternal correction;" that is, correcting a brother or sister who is being led astray from the many teachings of Christ, especially the one very dear to his heart, "that all may be one." Obviously, Jesus is talking about some major problems here when he outlines these three steps that, hopefully, may lead a straying or offending member of the community back toward reconciliation.

Jesus taught us, though, that before we go correcting other people, we should look to ourselves first. There is a story about a mother in India whose son had an insatiable desire for sweets, and she brought him a long way to talk to Gandhi, so he would convince her son not to eat so many sweets. Gandhi told her to bring her son back in two weeks. When mother and son returned two weeks later, Gandhi told the boy to stop eating so much sugar and the boy agreed. The mother asked Gandhi: "why did you not just say this to the boy two weeks ago and save me the hardship of traveling back here?" Gandhi replied "Two weeks ago I ate too many sweets. I needed to see if I could stop before I counseled the boy." (*Celebration: Sept 7, 2014 – Homily*) Jesus tells us if we try to take the gnat out of our brother or sister's eye, we first need to remove the beam from our own eye. (Mt. 7,3)

It is a delicate thing to remind someone that what they are doing is not right. In my ministry, I have had successful and rewarding moments when I have seen people respond to my encouragement to make some change in how they were living, on the other hand I have also been told to "get lost." Even knowing what happened to Jesus who tried to teach God's way, I still try to do what Jesus sent me to do, for I shudder when I read today's passage from Ezekiel where God tells Ezekiel "if you do not speak to the wicked person about their wickedness, I will hold you responsible for the consequences of his or her wrongdoing." I may have a lot to answer for because of things I didn't say or do and it frightens me.

Love is the motivation behind any form of fraternal correction. Paul tells us today: "owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." We don't go around finding fault with people because we enjoy it, we do it because we love them and we hate to see them doing things that will cause themselves harm, either spiritually (or physically). I include the idea of physical harm because a brother or sister may be destroying themselves by eating or drinking too much or smoking or getting no exercise or getting hooked on pornography or recreational drugs. The consequences of those things are addictive and destructive as we know.

Often our words of wisdom or encouragement, even offered in love, fall on deaf ears. In today's gospel, Jesus gives us one more way to help our brother or sister who is straying from the path of righteousness. Jesus encourages prayer for the person. As a matter of fact, even before we dare to offer advice or criticism to another, we should pray for the right words and then if we are pushed off or told to mind our own business, we should keep on praying for them. I think St. James summarized everything I have tried to say when he ended his epistle: "whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his (or her) soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Feast of the Holy Cross

Sept. 14, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

Our first reading takes us back over a thousand years before Christ to the time when Moses was leading God's people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. The trip through the desert was extremely difficult and at times the people complained bitterly. One of their difficulties was an encounter with a nest of poisonous serpents whose bite brought intense suffering and burning pain and then death. The serpents were called seraph serpents, for seraph means "fiery." The people saw this as punishment for their complaining. But God gave them a way to be healed from the serpent's bite. They had to look at an image of the serpent and they were healed. The remedy might remind us of the symbol often used today as an icon of the medical profession. In today's gospel, Jesus compares this event to his crucifixion. In today's gospel, Jesus tells us reflection on the crucifixion will bring us salvation and eternal life.

HOMILY

Congratulations to our former students who graduated from St. Boniface School in the class of 1944 - 70 years ago. At the time you were graduating, I was graduating from the first grade at the school right down the street - St. Patrick's. We were all looking forward to a more peaceful world and being able to move on to bigger and better things. It seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same. We're still fighting and we're still looking forward to peace and to bigger and better things. One thing for sure that got bigger is the world's population, which is bigger now by an increase of about 5 billion people over 1944. For better or worse we survived a lot. I pray every day we will continue to survive and stay safe.

Today we celebrate the exultation of the Holy Cross. When the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, his mother, also a Christian, St. Helen, went to Israel to search for the Cross on which Jesus died. Three crosses were found near Calvary and of the three, one healed a woman who was dying and that one was identified as the cross of Christ. Constantine built a large basilica over the spot where Calvary and the tomb of Jesus were located (they are only about 15 or 20 feet from one another). The basilica was finished on September 13, 335 and the next day the feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross was celebrated for the first time and has been celebrated every year thereafter.

Crucifixion was one of the most brutal and cruel forms of torture and death ever discovered by human beings. Constantine eliminated it as a form of capital punishment. Romans always were exempt from crucifixion. If they were to be executed for a capital crime, they were beheaded, not crucified. That is why statues of St. Paul always picture him holding a large sword, because he was a Roman citizen and that was how he was martyred. I could dwell on the more gruesome elements of crucifixion, but that is not the main message of today's theme. The main message is that through Christ's death, we might gain eternal life. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must

the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believed in him may have eternal life.”

One way Jesus' cross brings life is that if Jesus hadn't died as he did and then rose on the third day, no one would ever have heard of him or his miracles or his teachings. The unjust torture of this innocent man and his miraculously coming back to life brought him to our attention. Death is part of life, but his death opened up for the world a revelation that death is not the end of our existence but the beginning of a life that is beyond spectacular, if we accept Jesus' teachings as the way to arrive there.

I might illustrate the symbolism we heard earlier in the first reading about looking at the snake with faith to gain healing and learning to look at Jesus on the cross with faith in order to gain eternal life. You may have heard me tell this story a few times, but here it goes. When I was a child I had asthma; twice a year I would miss several weeks of school just trying to breathe and stay alive. Those were the days without inhalers or good medicines. My mother encouraged me to read about Jesus' passion in the Bible and I did. In a wonderful way, reading on the passion relaxed me and allowed me to breathe easily. His suffering and death was my source of peace. Ever since then I find great strength and comfort when I read the passion. It doesn't always make everything better, but it made me better.

I almost had an opportunity recently to help a lady in a nursing home who was furious that the administration changed her to a new room. I suggested she think of how Jesus suffered and assured her he probably wasn't very happy. She said she made up her mind she was going to be angry and unhappy until they moved her back to her old room. It's obviously not enough to just think about what Jesus suffered, but to let it sink into our minds and hearts. Amen.

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

September 21, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 25, 6-9; Mt. 20, 1-16*) When God's people were in exile in Babylon, they were as depressed as anyone could possibly be. They had lost everything. They were sure they had even lost God's love because of their sinfulness. Today we hear God's prophet assure them it is never too late to return to the Lord. For God says: "my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways." Even though they **knew** they were not worthy of God's mercy, the prophet assures them if they turn back to God, they will have God's mercy. Why is God so generous and forgiving? It is his nature to be that way.

HOMILY: In today's parable, we certainly see that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways, God's ways. In today's parable, Jesus tells us this is what the kingdom of heaven is like and it doesn't sound as if the Lord and Master of the kingdom plays fair.

The landowner must have been very wealthy considering all the people he had to hire to harvest his vineyard. In a normal situation, the landowner would have sent his servant to go look for people to hire and also the servant would pay the workers at the end of the day. But here it is the landowner, the Lord himself who directs how things are to be in the kingdom. As was the custom of the day, a worker was hired early in the morning and paid at the end of the day (a 12- hour work day). A day's wage for an unskilled worker is often called by the Roman name, denarius. It was just barely enough to support a family for one day. The parable is shocking for us to hear because we tend to look at the story solely from a monetary perspective. We figure if one hour is worth X amount of money, then twelve hours should earn twelve times as much.

But the landowner was looking at things from two perspectives: justice and fairness on the one hand and mercy and generosity on the other. He was fair and just to those who worked all day (since they were paid what had been agreed upon) while he chose to be generous to those who would need enough money to feed their family that day or the next. But that explanation still leaves me with an unanswered question: why couldn't the master be just a little more generous to those who gave him a full day's work? Here's what I think is the answer to that question. Remember this is a parable of the kingdom. If the denarius is the reward given to all those who labored in the vineyard, then what does it represent for those who live and serve in God's kingdom? Most of us already know the denarius represents heaven. And heaven is not a silver coin. Heaven is perfect happiness, and it is forever. In other words, if you have heaven, you have everything and nothing more can be added to it to make it any greater or fuller. Some people work long and hard to gain this happiness, some don't work nearly as hard, they come in at the last minute, and when all have eventually attained heaven everyone will have all the happiness of which they are capable and it will last forever. So, although today's parable at first hearing seems unfair, we discover it is more than fair. It proclaims the wonderful generosity and mercy of God, which reaches out to all people, from those who were favored to have been first invited into the vineyard to those who just made it in at the last hour.

I cannot conclude without pointing out that there is a suggestion of the last judgment in today's parable. The fact that people came to work at different times throughout the day reminds us that there are many opportunities to enter the kingdom but such opportunities do not go on forever. Summer days are long, winter days are short, but every day lasts only so long and so does each person's life. Jesus always reminds us that the time is limited for us to respond to his invitation to be part of the kingdom. It was what Jesus announced when he first began to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." (Mt. 4,17) Amen.

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

September 28, 2014

INTRODUCTION – (*Ezekiel 18, 25-28*) (*Matthew 21, 28-32*) In 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered the Jews, tore down their Temple, burnt their cities and took the surviving Jews to Babylon as captives and slaves, the Jews concluded God was punishing them for the sins of their ancestors. They complained that God was not being fair to them. In our first reading we hear God tell them, through his prophet Ezekiel, it is their own sins that created the disaster they were suffering. Yet with God the situation is never hopeless. They could always change their ways. We hear a similar message in today's gospel. If we have damaged our relationship with God, we can always turn things around.

HOMILY – In the preceding section of St. Matthew, we are told that Holy Week was beginning and Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem in a triumphal manner, riding on a donkey with the people shouting after him “Hosanna, to the Son of David.” These words mean: “Save us, Son of David.” The people were bestowing on Jesus a kingly title, which could have caused a significant upheaval in the city of David where the Temple was and where the Romans were especially watchful for any signs of revolt or insurrection. After Jesus asserted his royal authority, he went into the Temple and drove out all those who were in the business of buying and selling animals for sacrifice and he overturned the tables of the money changers. Naturally, the religious leaders challenged Jesus. He was stepping on their turf. They demanded to know where he got the authority to do what he had just done. So Jesus challenges them with the parable you just heard in today's gospel.

The parable of the two sons shows us two children who must have been a handful for their father. Neither one responded obediently to the father's request for help in the vineyard. The first boy said “no” to the father – in that culture it was a real insult. But he felt guilty enough about it to go to work anyway in the vineyard. The second son answered “yes,” but never followed through.

“Which of the two did his father's will?” is the main point in today's gospel. The son who said “no” at first, then changed his mind and went to work was the son who actually did what his father wanted. The other son was quite agreeable but was of no use to his father when it came to doing the job that needed to be done. Jesus is comparing the second son to the elders and chief priests in the way they responded to John the Baptist. According to Jesus, even the worst sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) listened to John the Baptist and repented. The religious leaders did not change their sinful ways.

This is a theme of actually doing what God wants us to do - a theme that we find frequently in all the gospels, but especially in Matthew. Here are a few examples:

Jesus says “not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Mt. 7, 21) At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “everyone who listens to these words of mind and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” (Mt. 7,24) By contrast, anyone who builds his life on any foundation other than God’s word, Jesus calls a “fool.” In a parable about a faithful servant, Jesus says when the master is out of town and unexpectedly returns to find his servant doing what he was supposed to be doing, that servant will be “blessed,” while if he is not doing what he was supposed to do he will be severely punished. (Mt. 24,51). The famous parable of the Last Judgment is all about what we do for others that will gain heaven for us while we will find ourselves rejected by Jesus and thrown out of the kingdom because of what we did not do. (Mt. 25,31ff)

Our faith is not just a matter of saying the right words or celebrating proper ritual. Faith is no different than other parts of our life in this regard. Example: how well does it work in marriage if one partner is always agreeable but never follows through, or are your bosses or teachers pleased with you where you go to work or school when you talk a good talk but never accomplish what you are supposed to do? Our faith includes expressing ourselves in prayer and ritual (i.e. using fitting word) but it also requires that we put into action the message and the commands that Jesus has given us. If we haven’t been living the way Jesus has taught us, it’s never too late to change things around as the young man in the gospel shows us, the son who initially said “no” to his father, but then had a change of heart. Amen.