

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

I have heard a lot of discussion lately about different controversies that seem to be dividing Catholics. In just the past year we had the presidential election, President Obama was speaking at the Notre Dame graduation, and the funeral for Ted Kennedy. I don't know the exact numbers but let's say that half of the Catholics voted for Obama and the other half voted for someone else. I have read editorials that say that the church is divided. Everyone thinks they have the truth on their side. Many Catholics think that Obama should not have been so honored at the prestigious Catholic University because of his stand on the rights of the unborn. But I bet you that Catholics on both sides of the issue can quote you from scripture, Catholic teachings, and probably even speeches from the Pope showing you the high principles from which they stand. Many Catholics felt honored to be in the same institution as great a man as Ted Kennedy for the work he did for immigrants, for civil rights, and for those with disabilities. Others thought we should ignore everything once you bring up his record on abortion. But wait, what's wrong with having different opinions, expressing principles, and standing up for what is right. What's wrong is that you are so loud I can't hear you. You are so loud that you can't hear Jesus trying to tell you that He will be tried, convicted, crucified on a cross, and on the third day rise again. You are so loud telling each other who is the greatest among the disciples that you can't hear the suffering servant trying to tell you that He is about to die – He is going to be taken from you and you will have to suffer the same fate.

It seems kind of ironic that the disciples were bickering about who was the greatest when Jesus was trying to tell them the greatest plan in human history. The plan for the salvation of all humanity. But they didn't understand what he was saying so they ignored it. It was too obtuse to comprehend so we best just ignore it. Sometimes if the idea does not conform to your viewpoint you don't really want to listen. They were all caught up in their grand plans for this new movement following Christ. I'm sure they all had solid principles on their side therefore it would be best if everyone listened to their ideas. But if your ideas seem foreign to my principles, I can just ignore them. Just like they ignored Jesus.

You might take this opportunity to feel a little bit superior to the disciples – after all you would never argue with each other who is the greatest among you. Well, perhaps you are not quite being honest with yourself because we all find ways to show each other who is the greatest. We use subtle comments to put another person down which raises us up. You are not better than the next person. Jesus tried to help us and the disciples understand by putting the child in our midst so that we might understand that the child follows with blind faith; not from a position of power or authority. A child trusts and will do what their parents tell them; like where they live, where they go to school, and what they eat. They are also open to a disposition of awe and wonder that is radically open to new ideas. They have to welcome plans that they don't have to figure out. Like a child, the disciples need to enter into this docile disposition because they trust and love a figure who is bigger and stronger than themselves. Jesus' disposition was one of constant trust in the Father.

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I don't mean to put down anyone who stands up for principles though. Jesus taught us by his own actions that he was not afraid to upset the status quo. Jesus was constantly pointing out the hypocrisy of religious leaders who pretended to care for the oppressed, pointing to sinners who wanted to ignore their own sins while condemning others for their sins, or the scandal of many people living in poverty among the rich. In our first reading today from Wisdom we hear that the people are a bit uncomfortable when they are called out by the person they call the "just one." The view in those days was pretty self-centered. The notion that when bad things happen to you God must be punishing you. If good things happen to you, God must be rewarding you. So, therefore, it was all about you. Your actions dictated God's actions. You put it that way and it sounds a bit silly that God would be so simple minded that he has to rely on you to determine the fate of history. But here comes this person trying to give us some wisdom, "the just one" is questioning our logic. Well, we don't like it when someone upsets our status quo. If we are so caught up in a small, narrow, little world where our opinions are so attached to who we are, we don't like to have our ideas questioned. The first sentence of our reading in Wisdom put it very clear how they wanted to handle the situation. "Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us." Sure, he is questioning the status quo so let's get rid of him. Later in the reading we see that they have a plan to torture the just one and surely if he is favored by God, he will be saved. Just like Jesus, the people don't like the messenger who upsets the status quo. Jesus didn't let torturers quiet him, he wasn't going to back down from his convictions. They did torture Jesus because he did upset the status quo. They tortured him because he stood for something – he stood for principles and the people stood to lose their comfortable lifestyle. Very short-sighted and very self-centered.

So, how should we stand for something? How do we remain united in our Catholic faith when we can't agree on the right candidate for president or how ideas are vetted at forums such as Catholic universities. Jesus told the disciples that if you want to be on the forefront of this issue then you have to use a different leadership style. You have to use the leadership style that Jesus perfected. Jesus led by serving. Jesus is saying that we have to let go of our over-inflated opinion of ourselves. If you want to be someone who is important, you have to let go of the things that make you feel valuable. You have to be open to be used for a bigger plan, a plan way bigger than yourself. You are making yourself very vulnerable and naive – like a child. We have to be a servant to all; we have to diminish our concerns for our opinions and more concerned for the benefit of the world.

In our second reading, Saint James explanation of our behavior stems from an influence of the devil. He explains that we are using wisdom borne from selfishness. He points to our selfish ambitions to only satisfy our personal pleasures. Instead we should be using wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits. St. James is saying that we should not allow the devil to divide us, to divide our Church, we must seek peace first and then allow Christ to form us.

If you operate from the standpoint that you do not have all of the answers, you have to listen to other ideas. We will expend much less energy listening to all viewpoints than trying to convert everyone to our way of thinking. You have two ears and one mouth so you should listen twice as much as you talk. So, we will remain a united Catholic Church as long as Jesus is our teacher – He has the words of eternal life, where else should we go?