February 3, 2019

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19; 1 Cor 12:31—13:13 or 1 Cor 13:4-13; Lk 4:21-30

Don Timmerman

Have you ever noticed that people who are well dressed and clean are more acceptable in our society? I saw a little girl on the street wearing nice clothing, hair nicely combed and clean. The passers-by paid lots of attention to her, asking if she is alright and if she needed their help with anything. Then I saw a little girl about the same age and color who was wearing a ragged dress, hair unkempt and smudges on her face. No one stopped to ask her questions or pay much attention to her. She was treated as an outcast. She did not conform to the standards set by society.

This is what Jesus encountered in the Temple. He was not accepted by the high priests and other religious figures. They thought “why should we pay attention to this boy whom we know to be merely a son of a poor carpenter? What could he say that is important to us? He is not worthy of being in the Temple trying to teach others.”

Christ’s message in today’s Gospel is that women and gentiles were loved by God just as much as those who were considered by society to be acceptable. He reminded his listeners that when there was a great famine in the country Elijah was sent not to one of the many widows in Israel but to a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon, north of Israel, and noted that Elisha healed no lepers in Israel, just Naaman the Syrian.

Why was this noteworthy? The Jews were taught that they should not hang out with women, lepers, sick people and people from other lands. Women, lepers and certainly non-Jews should not be part of their company since the Jews were the chosen people. How could this young upstart, Jesus, claim that women, lepers and non-Jews should be accepted in the Temple, the Jewish place of worship and sacrifice? They were so upset with Him that they tried to throw him over a cliff. He was not appreciated for his teaching of love for all.

We learn what Christ meant by love in the 2nd reading today. “Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. In fact, we could speak like the angels, yet if we do not have love it counts for nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Faith, hope and love remain, but the greatest of these if love.”
So how can we love our enemies? How can we act like Christ who refused to do harm to those who tried to kill Him? How can we possibly love like Christ asked us to do? My experience is that we must practice love so it becomes a habit. We must become accustomed to seeing everyone as Christ himself, and showing love to everyone. People do not become loving people by just wishing them to be such. They must practice it over and over again until it becomes a habit, a virtue. It is written that love never fails. This is true. If you show love to another that person will respect you. If you do good to those with whom you have difficulty those people will most likely treat you well. There would be no wars if people practiced being lovers. The problem is that we, like the priests in the Temple, cannot tolerate such teaching. That is why so many nations, like our own, are always at war and end up spending our money on weapons, war and training our young to do violence to another instead of on healthcare, education, and eliminating starvation and unsanitary conditions for the billion people in the world who are suffering because they lack these basic necessities of life.

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