

Homily for May 10, 2020

Back in the summer of 2001, five years after I had moved away from the Ottawa Valley, the City of Ottawa hosted the Francophone Games. Immediately after the Games closed over 100 participants, from abroad, decided they were not going back home to their country but instead were seeking refugee status in Canada. The next day, a popular radio talk show host (akin to Rush Limbaugh) began his show with a roar. He came out with guns firing. Calls immediately came in about what it means to be a Canadian, what it means to be a true Canadian, what it means to be a worthy Canadian, --even, finally, what it means to be a worthwhile human being. While the immigration issue is complex and while everyone has the right to their opinion, the call-in show got more mean-spirited as it went on.

The Early Church dealt with similar divisive issues. The first reading, during these 50 days of the Easter season, is always taken from the Acts of the Apostles, a book in the Bible that deals the beginning years of the Church's existence. A little context about today's first reading. The first Christians were not born into the Christian faith; the first Christians were adult converts from Judaism. They would not have seen themselves as converts but as Jewish-Christians or simply Jews who believed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. The "converts" who remained in Israel were simply called Hebrews. The "converts" who had been influenced by the Greek culture and Greek language, that was flourishing mostly outside of Israel, were called Hellenists. The Hellenist widows, we are told, were being neglected and even denied the basic necessity of food. The Hebrew converts to Christianity feared being swallowed up by the Greek culture that was broadening throughout the world. Their concern was not that widows were going hungry; their concern was about maintaining their Hebrew language and identity. The Hebrews saw the Hellenists as a threat to their way of life.

So, they, like the people in Ottawa in 2001, had a social problem on their hands. The tone of those Early Christian converts was escalating into finger pointing. They had to decide: Who was in and who was out? Who was a real convert and who was not? Which group of widows were worthy of help and which were not? To respond to this, the Acts of the Apostles tells us that all the disciples gathered together and selected seven among them who were ***full of Spirit and wisdom*** (Acts 6:3). That was the criteria: Spirit and wisdom. You may notice the seven chosen all have Greek-sounding names, Stephen, Philip and five whose names nobody knows how to pronounce. These seven were the Church's first deacons and theirs was a ministry of service, justice and compassion. Theirs was not a ministry of drawing up more rules or better guidelines of "how to become a church." Their job then was exactly like our job now-- to discern where God's Word was pointing them and where human need was calling them. In the end, it's all the

Being a widow

--women in general had no public status, apart from that granted through an adult male (Father, husband or son)

--A widow without an adult son or father to return to would be completely powerless in this society.

--She would not likely starve to death, as she could beg.....but she would be destitute.



same place. The bottom line for these first deacons of the Church was: there are hungry, helpless widows in our midst, we need to respond. It has nothing to do with being a Hellenist or a Hebrew; it has got everything to do with responding to basic human need. They are hungry, so let us build a bridge to their world.

Now, can we live in a Church or a society without laws or guidelines? No. But, if we could, it would be total chaos, disorder, and greed; we would probably self-destruct. But know this, there is no guarantee that those who create and enforce laws will necessarily be endowed with **Spirit and wisdom**. Spirit and wisdom are gifts from God that we all have to discern, not just those in leadership. Those seven who were chosen, after much discernment, were bridge-builders. They built a bridge between the Hellenists who welcomed the larger world and the Hebrews who felt threatened by the larger, Greek-speaking world. They built a bridge between food and those hungering for it. By the way, you have all heard the pope being referred to as the pontiff (or the Holy Pontiff, or the Pontiff of Rome). The word pontiff means “bridge-builder.” For those of you who are French-speaking, the word pontiff begins with “pont” (p-o-n-t) meaning bridge. Each of us, not just the pope, is called to be a pontiff, a bridge-builder.

If we do not become bridge-builders, I guarantee we will put all our energies in creating laws about who's in and who's out; who's a worthy Canadian/a worthy Christian/a worthy Catholic and who's not; who should be receiving Communion and who should not; who's in a state of grace and who's just a disgrace.

In that second reading, Peter, the first “pontiff,” is addressing Gentiles (non-Jews, outsiders) with words that, up until then, were reserved for only Jews, God's chosen people. He says to the Gentiles, while not excluding the Jews, “**you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's chosen people.**” When he said this, he was not quoting a constitution, a body of laws. No. He was speaking from a space of **Spirit and wisdom**...God's Spirit and God's wisdom.

And when Jesus, in today's gospel, says, “**In my Father's house there are many dwelling places,**” again, he is not compelled to say this because he feels obligated to uphold rules and regulations. He says it firstly, because he knows the truth about God. And the truth about God is that God's love is so large, there is room enough for everyone. And he says it secondly, because God's Spirit and God's wisdom are bursting inside of him.

Once in a while, I have to meet a person who jars me out of my comfortable existence, a person who lives on the edge and dares me to come there, even if it's just for a short time. And usually it is for just a short time, but time long enough to give me reason to reflect on life at



deeper level, when I'm back to the comfort of the rectory. Yesterday, I spent an hour and a half with a 26-year old, first in the cold rain, then in my car chatting, warming up, and drinking coffee with her life's possessions in a plastic bag on the floor of the car. She had just spent the night in jail. I actually saw her walking out of the police station. She told me, that as a child she was bounced from foster home to foster home, and

that at age 19 she had a child of her own, a boy. That boy is now seven. Her name may, or may not, be Miranda. When I asked her, she told me her only hopes in life were to compose and sing music and to be reunited some day with her little boy. She has been living on the streets for the

past three years and “working” the streets for much longer than that. Through her own admission, she has made trouble at the shelters and is not welcomed back.

In the world of rules and regulations, Miranda has screwed up and broken every one of them. In the world of who’s in and who’s out, Miranda is definitely out. In the pecking order of social life, she’s like the Hellenist widows; she’s at the very bottom of society. But there is another world, the world that Jesus told us about. It is called the Kingdom of God. And in that world, Miranda, ***you are part of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.*** I hope, for the hour and a half we spent together yesterday, I was able to be a bridge-builder for you, Miranda; you certainly were for me. It is nothing less than the Word of God and human need that makes two strangers come together in the cold rain. Happy Mother’s Day, Miranda. I hope you find you son.

Fr. Phil