

Homily – January 28th, 2024 – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wow, the people who were in the assembly that day must have had some interesting conversations when they left the synagogue and headed for home. This was not your typical sabbath gathering with just the usual prayers and hymns and message from the rabbi. As I read and thought about today's gospel, there were a few questions that came to mind and if you will indulge me, I would like to share these questions with you.

When you come to church on either Saturday or Sunday, what are you expecting to see? Are you expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen? Are you open to anything different happening? Are you hoping to hear something in a homily that might take you out of your comfort zone or even challenge what you previously believed to be untouchable? Fr. Richard Rohr says that most people do not go to church to be challenged or transformed, but rather to have what they already believe re-enforced. I can't think of too many things that would be further away from what Jesus was all about in his ministry. He challenged people (especially church people) constantly; he ticked off people (especially church people) constantly. The gospels are full of stories of the religious authorities pushing back against Jesus and what he was teaching. Taking the time to explain to him which rule or law he would be breaking if he continued on this course.

Before we get too hard on the folks who were hard on Jesus, let's step back and see how we, the church of today, stack up against the church of first century Palestine. Whenever I read the stories in Scripture, and maybe you do the same thing, I try to see where I would fit in the story. Which person do I most closely identify with. When Jesus asked the apostles, "Who do you say that I am?", I like to think that I would be the Simon Peter of the group, the first to say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Or when Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave everything they knew (family, work, livelihood) and follow him as we heard in last week's gospel, I like to think that I would have done the same as them, with no hesitation, and followed him.

As I have gotten older, I have become a little more realistic about myself and have begun to leave that fantasy world behind. In my first year of biblical studies, I remember our professor saying that when you are looking at the Gospels and trying to discern who you are most like in the story, the answer most of the time is

the Pharisees. The religious establishment of the day. For me, this was not a welcome revelation. And you want to talk about being nudged a little out of my comfort zone, I was being moved to the next province. Looking back, I think the reason this bothered me so much was that, in my heart of hearts, I believed he was right. And I couldn't just pawn it off to the grand institutional church with its rules and rubrics, this was me, and me had to change.

As some of you may know, I grew up in a very traditional Roman Catholic home with 6 siblings, a hard-working, good father and a very traditional (especially when it came to church) mom. We went to mass not only on the weekends, but many weekdays as well; we said the rosary most nights and we spent little to no time reading the bible. For Mom, anything or anyone who said or did something that might not have been totally aligned with church teaching was dismissed out of hand with no time for differing points of view. And this is what she taught her children as well. Please don't misunderstand what I am saying here, my mother was a wonderful role model who instilled all of us with a foundation in faith that has sustained each one of us for a lifetime. I only share this to give you an idea of how my belief system was shaped.

Like a lot of us, I still carry and hold dear some of my mom's teachings, as I am sure you hold close some of the things your parents taught you, but not all of them. As we grow and we meet new people who may not see the world the same way we do, or maybe make decisions that we don't think are correct, we are forced to give some things a re-think. For me, those people I am speaking of would be our children. Kim and I have taught our kids many things and done our best to instill in them a firm foundation for their faith journey. The one thing my children have taught and instilled in me, that I probably wasn't too good at before, is acceptance. Our children, as I expect many of yours, have made choices and decisions that we would not have agreed with. And they believe things that maybe we don't. But no matter what they have done, or will do, what their politics or religion are, or how they choose to live their lives, there is one thing that will never change. There is always a place for them at our table. They can always come home!

I think we have taken Christianity and turned it into a set of beliefs and rules and regulations instead of a way of life. And I think Jesus was trying to instill in us a new way to live. A way that allows us to accept people where they are at, leaving

judgment behind. To journey with the people God puts in our life, without feeling the need to fix them. There is an old saying that goes like this: "God calls us to catch the fish, he does not expect us to clean them". The problem with living out of only a sense of following the rules is that it will always lead us to separation. We can feel morally superior to those who we feel are not getting it as right as we are. There is always something we can quote, be it a bible verse or a part of canon law that makes someone else feel like they are less and not worthy of God's love.

It is really hard to learn to love someone you are constantly seeing wrong in, and it is even harder for those you are judging to love you. Rules and laws certainly have their place not only in society but also in our families and in our church. Without them, life would be chaos. But they cannot be the driving force behind how we live out our faith. If they are, I think we are missing a tremendous opportunity to experience God's love and how that love can change our life. I found a story recently and I would like to share it with you. I think it has a wonderful message of how God can take our little good deeds and turn them into something life changing.

One day a man saw an elderly lady, stranded on the side of the road and could see she needed help. As he approached her, even with a smile on his face, he could see that she was worried. To her, he didn't look safe; he looked poor and hungry. He said to her, "I'm here to help you, ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm? As he was making casual conversation with her, and to help her feel at ease, he said, by the way, my name is Bryan Anderson." As he worked at fixing her flat tire, they continued their conversation and she also shared her name and where she was from. She said she couldn't thank him enough for coming to her aid and asked him how much she owed him. Bryan never thought twice about being paid. This was not a job to him, it was simply helping someone in need, and God knows there have been plenty of people help him when he needed it. He told her that if she really wanted to pay him, she could offer help the next time she saw someone in need.

A few miles down the road the lady saw a small café and stopped for a bite to eat. As the waitress came over to her table the lady noticed that she was quite pregnant, and looked tired, and yet was friendly and wore a smile the whole time. When the lady had finished her meal, she paid the waitress with a hundred dollar

bill. As the waitress went to get her change, the elderly lady slipped out of the restaurant. The waitress wondered where the lady could be and then she saw something written on the napkin. It said, "you don't owe me anything. Somebody once helped me out, the way I am helping you." Under the napkin there were four more hundred dollar bills.

That night when the waitress got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about the much-needed money and what the lady had written. How could this lady have known how much her and her husband needed this money, especially with a baby due in the next month. She also knew how worried her husband was, as he lay sleeping next to her. She leaned over and gave him a soft kiss and whispered, "everything is going to be all right. I love you, Bryan Anderson."

~Mark Mahoney