

Ordinary 5A - 2020

I want to share two insights into how we can be salt of the earth and light for the world.

To answer that question I would like to tell you about a remarkable man. Born Bernard Casey, he was a restless teenager. Leaving the family farm at age 17 he got a series of jobs: lumberjack, hospital orderly, prison guard and street car driver. In that job he witnessed a man stab to death a young woman. The brutal murder shook him up and made him think seriously about what he wanted to do with his life.

He entered the Milwaukee seminary but did so poorly in his studies they advised him to join a religious order. The Capuchins accepted him and he became a "simplex priest" which means he could celebrate Mass but not preach doctrinal sermons or hear confessions. Bernard received a new name - Fr. Solanus - and they assigned him as monastery doorman.

Many people would consider that a dead-end job, but Fr. Solanus didn't see it that way. He put his whole heart into it. People with problems began to come to him for prayer. Once a family brought a sixteen month old girl suffering from leukemia. They had exhausted all medical avenues. The child was so weak she could not walk up a step. Fr. Solanus listened to the parents, prayed with them and said, "Thank God ahead of time." He bent down, gave little Elizabeth a piece of candy and whispered, "You're going to be all right." When the parents took Elizabeth back to the specialists, they were shocked. All traces of the leukemia had disappeared.

This miracle illustrates Fr. Solanus' secret - how God made him salt for the earth. His secret was gratitude. He used to say that gratitude is the first sign of intelligence. He added that the worst ingratitude is atheism. I sometimes wonder how much of the modern denial of God comes down to lack to gratitude. Fr. Solanus observed, "ingratitude leads many to break with God and our neighbor."

In the past few weeks we've done our share of grumbling and complaining. I've been helped by Fr. Solanus - now known as Blessed Solanus Casey. He had a difficult life and in the end suffered a long, painful disease. Still - as

far as we know - he did not fall into ingratitude. He kept saying, "Thank God ahead of time." Thus Blessed Solanus became salt to heal and sustain others. Perhaps his secret lay in what Paul said in the second reading: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Second: Compassion is at the heart of all the major religions of the world as it is of Christianity. The Golden rule of doing unto others what you would have done unto you or in its negative form of not doing unto others what would you would not have done unto you, is at the basis of this compassion.

However, it is true that in the course of history, many religions including Christians have gone off in other directions. They have not followed the golden rule at all and have used their religion to promote the egotistic concerns that have become the cause of many wars. One could say that many "religious" people are concerned more about belief than compassion. But if we are the light of the world, it is in living compassionately in the world as individuals and together as a community...

The compassionate life is not easy in our time. In many ways it is alien to our way of life. The economy is intensely competitive and individualistic, and encourages us to put ourselves first. It is also about the accumulation of goods which never seem to be enough. It is about status and power over others. It is about pursuing our own interests at whatever cost to our rivals.

So, to concentrate of the emotions of compassion, joy, friendship, even-mindedness and gratitude takes commitment, perseverance and continual practice of going beyond our ego concerns and reaching out to others.

The world needs compassion and working with all others who are committed to the compassionate life, no matter who they are, what religion or tradition they may adhere to, or whether they relate to any religion or particular tradition, we can make difference

There is much darkness in the world. The world needs light in the midst of that darkness. It needs the light of compassion. We have seen that light in the life and death of Jesus as well as in the lives of other religious leaders

in the ancient world. We have seen that light in the lives of people we have come to know as Saints. In Sunday school a child was asked "What is a Saint?" the child, thinking of the stained glass windows in the church answer, "One who the light shines through". We have also seen that light in the lives recent people such as Victor Frankl, Mahatma Ghandi and Albert Schweitzer. There are many more we could point to that could be called modern saints.

A while back someone asked the preacher and writer Eugene Peterson what he would say if he were writing what he knew would be his very last sermon (and since Peterson died last year, I wonder if he ever did this). He replied, "I think I would want to talk about things that are immediate and ordinary. In the kind of world we live in, the primary way that I can get people to be aware of God is to say, 'Who are you going to have breakfast with tomorrow, and how are you going to treat that person?'"

Peterson suggests we need to stop thinking that being a Christian means always being part of only obvious religious contexts. We just need to pay attention to what the people around us are doing most every day and then help them do it in ways that glorify God. "In my last sermon, I guess I'd want to say, 'Go home and be good to your spouse. Treat your children with respect. Do a good job at work.'" We need to be salt in the real world, and that involves genuinely being with real people, listening to them well, and treating them as the little images of God they all are.