

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 19-20, 2017)

St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA

Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“You racist pigs!”

“You neo-Nazis!”

“You communist anarchists!”

“You white supremacists!”

“If you don’t want the statues torn down, you’re a supporter of slavery!”

“If you tear the statues down, you’re like the Chinese communists who whitewashed history!”

“You’re guilty of hate!”

“No, *you’re* guilty of hate.”

(It’s been a rough week, hasn’t it?)

Barcelona. Finland. The tragic, criminal scene in Charlottesville. And all week, the shouting of anger, the accusations, the self-righteousness on all political sides. People on both sides, hurling angry words at each other. Meanwhile, most of us wonder how best to respond, and we worry that Americans don’t know how to talk with each other anymore.

A rough week.

Bishops around the country have responded with clarity. Racism, the kind of racism espoused by white supremacists groups, is a sin against the living God who

created all of us. Any racist ideology which views people as superior due to the color of their skin is sinful, plain and simple.

What's not so simple is to recognize the lingering results of our racist past *in us*. Most of us at Saint Mary's do not carry torches. I regularly tell myself that I am not racist. But there are attitudes so pervasive in cultures that we pick them up unknowingly.

Charlottesville has caused me ask: where does racism linger in my own heart and mind? That's not an easy self-examination, but I believe that the Holy Spirit leads us when we are open in that way.

I also believe that moments like this call for actual dialogue. But you know from your own experience – real dialogue can't happen when everyone in the room believes 1) that I am always right and 2) that everyone who disagrees with me is not only wrong, but is *evil*.

Yet, it seems, that is where we are. If we listen carefully, it appears that lots of people are shouting about the evil they see in *others*, without recognizing that they may be doing similar things *themselves*. For instance:

+ there are those who immediately denounced the president because, at first, he did not say the words “white supremacists.” And yet... for eight years, our previous president refused to say the words “Islamic Terrorists.” Some people who denounced President Obama for his refusal to ‘correctly name the terrorists’ have tried to defend President Trump for his ‘restraint.’ Those who praised the previous president for not labeling people are denouncing the current president for not saying the correct label.

My struggle is: doesn't real dialogue require that we all approach the conversation with some sense of moral consistency? Can I denounce someone else for something I myself have done?

+ some people are saying that Donald Trump's angry campaign rhetoric is directly responsible for the deaths in Charlottesville. Angry words, they argue, lead to

violent deeds. And make no mistake – I find the hate-filled rhetoric of white supremacists to be abhorrent and dangerous.

Yet I struggle with my experience. No single group has a monopoly on angry or hate-filled words. There are video tapes of protestors with the “Black Lives Matter” organization, walking down an American street shouting, “What do we want? Dead cops! When do we want it? Now!”

Those words were uttered not long before 5 police officers in Dallas were targeted and killed. There are mosques in America where people shout ‘Death to America.’ There is the Baptist Church in Kansas that shouts “God hates homosexuals.” And just this week, a Democrat state senator from Missouri said on Facebook: “I hope that Trump is assassinated.”

Most of us are horrified by the hate filled language coming from the racist corners of conservative America. And we are horrified by the hate filled language that comes from some liberal Americans. Sadly, the angry people on both sides don’t seem willing to consider that they might say and do the very kinds of things that they object to in each other.

If I am going to denounce what I consider to be YOUR hate speech, first I must ask: are my words ever full of hate?

If I am going to denounce what I consider to be YOUR divisiveness, your imperfections, and lack of love, first I must consider: have I honestly dealt with *my* divisiveness, imperfections, and lack of love?

I ask for your patience today.

In this hard week, I’ve wrestled with what to preach and prayed about what God wants us to hear. And, today’s readings offer profound insight for moments like this.

In today’s first reading, the prophet Isaiah is dealing with – you guessed it – a community divided on religious, ethnic and racial lines. During the 6th century BC,

most of the people of Israel had been exiled, sent as slaves in foreign lands. Then, finally, they were allowed to return home.

And when they got home, they discovered that *foreigners* had moved into their old neighborhoods! And many of them had become Jews!

This challenged the original people of Israel, who thought that being Jewish was not just about faith, it was also a racial and national identity. So division happened: “You don’t belong here! You’re not really Jewish. You’re evil.” Sound familiar?

Both sides asked the Prophet Isaiah, “Whose side is God on?”

And Isaiah said – for this division to end, BOTH sides have to confess their sinfulness and change. *Both sides.*

To folks who thought that they alone were the chosen people, who thought that they were superior to these foreigners, God says: No. The foreigners are welcome in my house. “My house is a house of prayer for all people.” *All people.* So to those seeking racial and religious purity, the challenge came from God: open your hearts to these foreigners who are also children of God.

And to the foreigners, God says: if you want to be part of my holy people, you must live a holy life, and keep the covenant, and observe the Sabbath, and do what pleases me.

Notice, God does not say to the foreigners, ‘just keep doing whatever you want.’ No, to the newcomers in the land there was the call from God to lead a holy and faithful life... which would require change in them.

Isaiah confronts a divided people, and reminds them – God wants to challenge and change all of you.

And in today’s Gospel, it appears that even *Jesus* is challenged and changed. Franky, this is a hard Gospel to hear, because in it Jesus appears to call this woman a horrible name. He calls her a ‘dog.’ He seems to say, you’re not included of my

ministry.

Hard to hear. What this foreigner woman *wants* is healing for her daughter.

We believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God. We also believe that he is fully human. The Gospel tells us that he, like the rest us, has to grow in wisdom and understanding. Yes, he is God. And yes, there are times when his understanding has to grow, just like our understanding has to grow.

It appears that Jesus, at first, understood his ministry to be focused on, and maybe even limited to, the Jewish people. Maybe what's going on in today's Gospel is an "aha" moment in Jesus' *human* journey, where the fierce faith of this foreign woman helps him to see that his God-given ministry is NOT just to a select few... but is intended for *all* of God's children.

Yes, Jesus calls the woman a harsh name. But she responds with... love and faith and honesty. And she is blessed. And her daughter is blessed. And Jesus is blessed.

Our *nation* needs to be blessed. In my prayer, I think the Lord is telling me that our nation's problems will not be solved by *more* angry words and accusations. Martin Luther King said that hate cannot drive out hate.

We Christians are called, at times like this, to model an alternative, where we speak *with* each other, in a dialogue guided by love, and faith and honesty.

So, honesty is where I'm starting this week. I'm looking at the people who annoy me, the people I disagree with, the people I think are just wrong, and I am humbly asking God – "show me. Show me how I sometimes think the way they think, and speak the way they speak, and hate the way they hate."

Change me Lord. Teach me that the world will not be changed by me calling other people names. The world will be changed when we call upon YOUR name.