

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Sept. 10. 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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The images are dramatic.

In Houston, a black police officer carrying an elderly white woman through the water. A white firefighter rescuing an African American family from their flooded home. Students from a Jesuit High School, “borrowing” their father’s air boat (without his permission!), going down a flooded block to help families from Ghana and Guatemala.

In the initial days after the hurricane hit Texas, we started to see these images. For many of us these images were a source of hope. For a moment, at least, we did not have to argue about whether or not to tear down statues. For a time, we did not have to listen to the shouts of white supremacists or Black Lives Matter. For a moment, we saw Americans being Americans.

Don’t get me wrong – hurricanes don’t give us an excuse not to confront important issues. We must continue the dialog about racer relations in America, the lingering and systemic effects of racism in our county’s history, and how that has an impact on all of us.

But many of us looked at the photos from Houston, and we were relieved. In a crisis, the barriers of race seemed to be set aside, at least in many instances. People of every race, language and way of life helped their neighbors of every race language and way of life. Everyone faced a common challenge, and everyone worked toward a common goal – making sure that the other human beings around them were safe and taken care of.

In moments like this, it seems we are forced , yes forced, to acknowledge something we should never forget: that we are all part of the human family, and that every human being has dignity and value. At end of today’s Gospel, Jesus reminds us that wherever human beings are, he is there, in our midst. He is there, because he is present in every human being. Every human being is created in God’s image and their life is God’s precious gift. Jesus calls us to recognize the dignity of every neighbor.

And we do – at least in moments like this. Neighbors just help neighbors. And people like us, who may not know a single soul in Houston, have an innate sense that we need to help our brothers and sisters. So, after communion today, we will take a collection to help. We announced this collection to help Houston – I suspect that Catholic Charities will likewise use some of the funds to help in Florida.

When I give to a collection like this, on a personal level, it is my way of saying to every resident

of Houston - black, white, Hispanic, African American, liberal, conservative, gay, straight – you and my brother and sister. The Christ who lives in me is the Christ who lives in you. And If I have any means to help, I must help. This is what love looks like. This is what love requires. I see Christ in you. And I treat you with that dignity.

So far, so good.

But there is more to today's Gospel than an encouragement to respect and love hurricane victims a thousand miles from here. In fact, respecting and loving hurricane victims a thousand miles from here is *easy*. Write the check, tell yourself you've helped, then go home and watch football...

But in today's Gospel, Jesus asks – actually he *demand*s – that we not limit our respect and love to people a thousand miles away. Jesus asks and demands that we respect and love the people *right in front of us*. Even the people with whom we disagree. Even the ones who may have done something that has *ticked us off*.

This is where it gets harder.

Jesus says: If your sister or brother has sinned against you; if they've done something that has hurt you, confused you, harmed you, caused you pain... here is how a Christian handles it...

If your neighbor has said or done something which leaves you shaking your head, here is how you must respond...

Go and talk with them.

When something has happened between you and someone else, when something difficult has arisen, go and talk *with* them. Do not talk *about* them to everyone else.

Frankly, I think this is one of Jesus' most ignored teachings. And we ignore it at the risk of our souls. I think it is ignored because it is just so hard.

When someone hurts me or does something with which I disagree, Jesus demands that I go and speak with them. It's easy to love a hurricane victim 1000 miles away. But Jesus calls me to love the person who just made a decision that I disagree with.

It's easy to say, "Isn't it nice that all of the different people in Houston are loving each other?" But what happens when the person next to me says or does something different than I wanted them to?

The Gospel demands that the *Christ in you* must honor the *Christ in them*. The Jesus who loves that other person wants you to love that other person. And that love is expressed in the concrete way that you respect their dignity as a child of God.

So the instructions of Jesus are clear. If someone sins against you, hurts you or does something that causes you pain:

- + go and speak with them, *alone*.
- + maybe even go and try again!
- + then take someone with you to talk together
- + then ask for the help of the church
- + and only after all of that has failed, then you can treat them like a “Gentile or tax collector.”

(But before you assume that this means that you can dismiss and ignore them, remember: this is Matthew’s Gospel. And what job did Matthew have? He was a tax collector? And how did Jesus treat this tax collector? He made him an Apostle, and loved him!)

These instructions from Jesus are clear. And they sound so simple. But this Gospel behavior is so counter to what we do in our culture!

Even people who call themselves ‘good Catholics’ or ‘faithful Christians’ ignore this teaching of Jesus on a regular basis.

How?

- + I get an email from someone, and I am upset by it. So instead of calling the person and asking to speak directly to them about it, I forward that email to 7 friends, with a comment, “Can you believe she did this?”
- + a member of your family says or does something that hurts you in some way. Instead of speaking with them, you go to facebook and post angry words for all to see.
- + your boss makes a decision with which you disagree. Instead of going to them to speak, you spend the next month tearing them down at the coffee machine.
- + your former spouse hurts you deeply. Instead of speaking with them about it, you take every opportunity to speak ill of them in front of your children.
- + your pastor says something you don’t like. You don’t speak with him, instead you send out a tweet calling him a heretic.
- + your neighbor has a dog that won’t stop barking. You don’t speak with them, you spend the summer sitting at the local pool, speaking ill of them.
- + your neighbor – whose skin is a different color than yours – says something at a dinner party

that gets you mad. So you go home and rant to your spouse. But Jesus would say, “go and talk with them.” Jesus would suggest, ‘Call up that neighbor, ask them to lunch, and listen to their experience.’

Jesus does not provide any wiggle room here. I wish he did, because I know that this is not an easy teaching, and I know that I do not carry it out perfectly.

Still, we are inspired when we see people - very different people – working together, speaking together, striving together to help one another... perhaps after a storm.

But it’s harder to work together, respect each other, speak together, when the person you’re struggling with has a face and a name and is right in front of you.

Loving neighbors from a distance is easy.
Loving a neighbor who has hurt you is much harder.
Loving those with whom we disagree is a hard Gospel task.
Which may be why it is so seldom tried.

But this is what our Savior demands. He shows us the way. He teaches us how. And in this Eucharist, he gives us the grace and strength we need, to begin...

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