

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 16, 2020)  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
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“You racist pigs!”

“You communist anarchists!”

“You white supremacists!”

“You neo-Marxists!”

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

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

“If you don’t wear your mask, you want to kill your neighbor!”

“If you wear your mask, you’re participating in mass hysteria!”

“You’re guilty of hate!”

“No, *you’re* guilty of hate.”

(So, how’s your week been?)

Three years ago this week, the nation was dealing with the tragic outcomes of the racial incidents in Charlottesville. Three years later, one wonders if we learned anything from Charlottesville?

If you stay at home watching too much TV, your heart and soul are overwhelmed by the shouting of anger, the accusations, the self-righteousness on all political sides. People on all sides, hurling angry words at each other. Meanwhile, many of us wonder how best to respond, and we want to respond from a Gospel perspective. And we wonder how it happened that many Americans don’t know how to talk with each other anymore?

Church leaders, like our Catholic Bishops, articulate basic Gospel truths. Our bishops tell us that racism is a sin against the living God who created all of us. Any racist ideology which views people as superior or inferior due to the color of their skin is sinful, plain and simple.

What's not so simple is to recognize and heal the lingering results of our racist past *in us*. Most of us at Saint Mary's do not wear white hoods and burn crosses on other people's lawns. I occasionally tell myself that 'I don't do overtly racist things.' But there *are* attitudes so pervasive in cultures that we pick them up unknowingly.

So I prayerfully ask myself: 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 the Holy Spirit calls us to 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*.

But isn't that where we seem to be right now? Lots of people are shouting about the evil they see in *others*, without recognizing that they may be doing similar things *themselves*.

Doesn't real dialogue require that we approach the conversation with some sense of moral consistency? Can I denounce someone else for something I myself have done? Can I denounce anger in others if I myself am spewing anger?

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 corners of liberal American. Sadly, the angry people on both sides don't seem willing to consider the possibility that they might say and do the very kinds of things that they object to in others.

If I am going to point out and challenge what I consider to be YOUR divisiveness, your imperfections, and lack of love, the Bible first requires that I must consider: have I honestly dealt with *my* divisiveness, imperfections, and lack of love?

These are hard days, and preachers have to pray hard in order to listen to the Spirit and speak a word that encourages and challenges every listener. Fortunately, 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 those foreigners 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, divisions happened as the exiles returned, and people started shouting: “You don’t belong here! You’re not really Jewish. You’re evil. You’re judgmental.” Sound familiar?

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

And Isaiah answered that for this division to end, BOTH sides had 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. Frankly, this is a hard Gospel to hear, because in it Jesus appears to call this woman a horrible name. He seems to call her (and her daughter) a ‘dog.’ He seems to say, ‘you’re not included of my ministry. You’re the wrong kind of person.’

Hard to hear. What this foreigner, this 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. Like’s Gospel tells us that Jesus, 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 apparently 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. Jesus said "perfect love" casts out whatever has its grip on us.

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. Within that context we can stand up for what is true, knowing that we have followed Jesus' commandment to always 'speak the truth in love.'

So, I am praying for God to help me be honest. 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.

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