

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 17, 2011

One of my great disappointments in life was the painful realization that the church to which I belong is imperfect. This should not have surprised me. Religious or not, any group is made up of limited human beings. Still, idealistic as I was at a young age, I expected more from the priests in my parish on Queen Anne Hill. But then, what right did I have to point a finger at others? My own limitations should have given me some insight into this matter.

I am not the only person who has been disappointed in this way. We all know good, sincere people who have left the church because they are disappointed with some of its members. They are offended by poor liturgies or uninspiring preaching. They can no longer abide the sexism or racism that grips so many. They are disillusioned by the disregard of the privileged for the vulnerable and needy of the world. They are horrified by the abuse of power and authority. They maintain that the church should be above such misconduct.

There certainly are many people within the church who stand in opposition to such evils and who do what they can to eliminate them. Still, the church is not perfect. Nothing made up of limited human beings is. And in our own ways, we all contribute to this lack of perfection. This is no excuse for wrongdoing. It is simply a statement of fact. The church is “already but not yet” holy.

Jesus was well aware of this condition. We see this in the parable of today’s Gospel. The field (the church) contains both wheat and weeds. Our inclination might be to rid that field of those we consider undesirable. Jesus insists: No! In our zeal to uproot what is bad, we might uproot what is good. Besides, who determines which is which? Dishonorable people have often been thought to be righteous, while the truly righteous have been overlooked. Furthermore, there is always the possibility of conversion.

I had a conversation with a person the other day who had always understood, he said, that Catholicism is a list of doctrines and rules that you have to accept to be Catholic. If you don’t accept them, then you’re not a Catholic. Kind of an extended loyalty test. Wrong! Catholicism is not an exclusivist sect with rigid

boundaries. It has a rich, complex, diversified, pluralistic heritage. Anyone who has read Catholic history is well aware that its tradition has always been pluralistic and that it has defined its boundaries out as far as possible, to include everyone it can. In the words of one of the great Catholic writers of the last century, James Joyce, Catholicism means – Here Comes Everyone. We belong to a church that is an assemblage of sinners, ourselves among them.

The parable of the mustard seed teaches us to overcome our gender, racial, ethnic, economic and any other biases in order to make room for all people. The parable of the yeast prompts us to give of ourselves in order that the community may be transformed into something that is life-giving. It is precisely through the give-and-take of life with other selfish, inconsiderate sinners that we learn to be patient and understanding, tolerant and forgiving. We need not be merely offended by each other. We can also be encouraged and inspired.

In a sense, the parables are dangerous reading. As Mark Twain said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.” The Gospel is a source of comfort, yes, and it should give us courage. But, it should also disturb us. It should stir us into action. And if it’s not doing those things, and if it’s just in our heads, then I don’t think we’re doing justice to the living Word of God. If we really believe the Gospel, we just might have to change how we live our lives.

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