

Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
March 6, 2011

Today's reading is the end of what surely is the most challenging part of Matthew's Gospel, that long discourse that we call the Sermon on the Mount, a discourse which challenges us to be faithful to the very hard, difficult, challenging teachings of Jesus. The wise person is the one who hears the Word of God and follows it. That's what Jesus is saying when he tells us, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the reign of God, the one who does the will of God." The will of God: "anyone who hears these words of mine and acts accordingly," that is the one who is following God's will.

It must have been true right there at the beginning. That people found these teachings of Jesus almost too much. Remember what Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the gentle, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice's sake. Blessed are those who work for peace."

In all of these ways, Jesus is describing the way that we must live if we're going to follow him. We have to live with gentleness, with compassion, the spirit of forgiveness, the spirit of poverty, and it's very challenging. But what's even more challenging is when Jesus goes on as we know, and tells us, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Thou shall not kill,' but I say to you, anyone who even carries a grudge in their heart against their brother or sister is not worthy of me. I say to you, even if you're going to the altar to offer your gift and there you remember your sister or brother has something against you, leave your gift, go first, be reconciled." Jesus is saying nothing is more important than forgiveness within our community – reconciliation with one another if there's been some discord. Nothing is more important, not even bringing your gift to the altar to worship God.

Then of course, Jesus goes on to say, "You have heard that it was said of old, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, offer no violent resistance to evil. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two. If someone strikes you in the one cheek, turn the other. If someone wants to take your coat, give them your cloak also." No matter what happens, you respond with love. Can you do that? Is it possible for us to really do that?

“You heard that it was said of old, ‘Love your neighbor, hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, love your enemy. Do good to the one who hurts you. Return good for evil.” These are really challenging teachings of Jesus and as I say, probably, that first Christian community wondered, “Did he really mean it? Are these teachings for us to live in our everyday life? Are we really expected to give up violence, give up hatred, respond to any evil perpetrated against us with love? Did he mean that?”

Well, what Jesus is telling us in that parable at the end, “Yes, I mean all of this. I really mean that you have to try to live according to this way, the way of God. Those who hear my words and follow them are building their house, that is their whole life is being built on rock. If you don’t hear my words and follow them, you’re a fool. You’re building your life on sand and it will be destroyed.”

It’s important for us, as we reflect on this and hear Jesus speak to us so clearly, that we bring it into the reality of our everyday life. That means that we have to challenge ourselves about the possessions we have. Do we really have too much, especially in a world where the majority of the people are absolutely poor? Are we ready to forgive within our families, in our parish family? Are we ready to love our enemies?

This has to be something that we carry out, not only in our everyday life, but also we have a responsibility to try and make sure that our nation is living according to these values of Jesus, especially since we’re a nation that’s so rich (at least for the upper class) and a nation that is so quick to go to war.

We have to change, and to many of us it will mean radical change in our lives. It’s very difficult to follow this way of Jesus, the way of the beatitudes, the way of active love, the way of rejecting violence and war. We might feel that we can’t do it, it’s too much, God really wouldn’t expect that of us. After all, we live in a world where there is so much evil.

It’s almost as though we want to postpone following the way of Jesus until the afterlife. But then, of course, you don’t need the way of Jesus. It’s now that we do need it. If we find it’s difficult to understand how we might do it, then we really should reflect carefully on what St. Paul wrote to that church in Rome,

where they were concerned only about following the 613 prescriptions of the Jewish law, and thinking that somehow blind obedience and formalistic carrying out of the law was all that was necessary. But Paul reminds them, and it's a very beautiful passage, "God makes us holy by means of faith in Jesus Christ, and this is applied to all who believe, without distinction of persons."

What Paul is telling us is that God's love, if we open ourselves, will be poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit that was given to us, and that love of God will change us and will enable us to build our house on rock.

Three concrete actions for building our house on rock are given by Jesus in the Gospel for Ash Wednesday: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In prayer, we allow God to attune our ears to the divine voice echoed in all of creation both in floods and calm. In fasting, we empty ourselves of our own desires, so as to hear the cries of those who hunger but not by choice. In almsgiving, we become a rock of safety for those who are buffeted hardest by life's storms.

So if we wish to be converted to this way of Jesus, I hope we will pray that we can open our hearts to the love of God and let that love of God enter us, transform us, so that now we can become true disciples of Jesus, following his way, a way that will lead ultimately to the reign of God, a reign of justice and peace in our own hearts, on the streets of downtown Seattle, in our church and nation, and throughout the world.

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