

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

October 7, 2012

A few years ago I was pastor at a mostly African American parish, St. Therese Church in the Madrona neighborhood. I remember one terribly muggy summer Sunday when I was greeting the people after the 11:00 Mass. I was relieved to see the last person exiting the church. At last, I could get back home. Old Mrs. Newsome with the big flowery hat walked with a cane, slowly but with great dignity. She looked at me, paused, and looked up to the sky and exclaimed: "Isn't it wonderful?" "What's wonderful?" I asked (somewhat skeptically). She replied, "Just to have given thanks to God."

I share this story because I believe it is fitting as we finish up summer and begin a busy fall season at Christ Our Hope that we reflect on the Mass and what it means for our life. If we are to be a community that knows how and why we pray (and marries lots of couples and initiates new children into our church), it makes sense that, at least from time to time, we step back and reflect on what exactly this prayer is for which we gather each Sunday.

Today, without avoiding the issue of marriage and divorce, I want to concentrate on the meaning of the Eucharist. Eucharist comes from the Greek word meaning "thanksgiving." Myrtle Newsome at St. Therese was a powerful reminder to me that this is the primary reason we gather each Sunday: to give thanks as a community of believers not only for what God has done for us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit but for what God continues to do for us in our lives and in our world.

But we must remember that we can never appreciate what the Liturgy of the Eucharist is if we separate it from the Liturgy of the Word. In the Liturgy of the Word, the church believes that when we proclaim and listen to the Scriptures, God is speaking to us. When the homily is preached, the church also believes that God is speaking to us.

Now, I agree, that sometimes it takes a great deal of faith to believe that God always speaks to us in the homily. As someone who has preached for almost forty-five years, I must admit that I am more than sensitive and passionate about this issue. There are many responsibilities shared by the priest, but central to all of them is that the homily should lead us all to Eucharist, to thanksgiving.

The Eucharistic Prayer begins with a call – “Lift up your hearts.” And we respond: “We lift them up to the Lord.” In other words, what was proclaimed in the Scriptures and in the homily has helped us to lift up our hearts to the Lord, to go to Eucharist, to thanksgiving. When the homily fails to give the Good News to the people, the homily fails to lead us all to Eucharist.

But even when the preacher fails, we as an assembly must be open to God’s Spirit so that we can hear the Good News in the Scriptures proclaimed even on a Sunday like this, when we hear a rather uncompromising Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. Where’s the Good News here, in light of the fact that so many people find themselves in situations today where divorce seems to be the only logical thing to do in order to get out of a living hell or an abusive situation?

Jesus does hold out the ideal of loving fidelity in marriage, and that itself is Good News. He also does something radical for his time. Jesus says that it is not only wrong when a man divorces and marries again but it is also an injustice against the wife he has dismissed. The Good News here is that Jesus preached the complementarity and equality of both man and woman in a marriage. And the challenge for the church today is its understanding of marriage as between just a man and a woman.

What matters, then, is that the Good News of the Liturgy of the Word leads us to the Eucharist which follows. And what, practically speaking, does the assembly do during the Eucharistic Prayer? As one of our kids said, “That’s the part of the Mass when the priest says a lot of words and we kneel down and pray.” The danger here is that the structure could lead to a passive assembly of people.

But we should remember that the prayer that the presider speaks is not his prayer but the prayer of the whole church. We show this when we sing as best we can those acclamations: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts,” and when we proclaim the Mystery of Faith and the Great Amen that we sing at the end of the prayer. All those acclamations are like bursts of single-hearted song.

If we here at Christ Our Hope want to learn how to pray, then let us first be open to the Good News in the Liturgy of the Word and then learn how to lift up our hearts and give God thanks and praise. It is not all that complicated, as the old black lady at St. Therese reminded me. We can learn it here at this table, gathered close to one another, gazing at simple bread and good wine.

There is one last thought I’d like to share with you about Sunday Mass at Christ Our Hope. Unlike some parishes where the priest rushes through the liturgy and the people respond as passive bystanders, visitors constantly comment, “What I really enjoyed about Mass here is that it seemed like all the people wanted to be in church.” Not a bad observation about Sunday liturgy. May we at Christ Our Hope pray the Eucharistic Prayer, as if we really want to be not only in church but a church gathered to give thanks.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor