

## Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

February 19, 2012

I am convinced that people say the dumbest things when it comes to facing a new situation. They feel so awkward. Their world has been turned upside down, and they are afraid of their own loss of a sense of control. One of the biggest myths in life is that we are in control. It seems as if many people want to blame someone: God, the doctor, their parents, politicians, the church, anybody.

The same kind of awkwardness existed in Jesus' day. We can appreciate just what is happening in today's gospel story. The story begins by stating that "he was at home" or, as other translations have it, "Jesus was in the house." *House* is a code word in Mark's gospel. It means "church." Thus, the church is where Jesus is to be found. In the gospels, Jesus is found especially where the community is gathered in remembrance of what he said and did for us in his dying and rising.

The religious leaders are astounded that Jesus would do something so new, something that belonged to God alone: the ability to forgive. They call the miracle worker a blasphemer. Once again, he turns their world upside down by asking a simple question: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk?'" It's a stunning question because both are equally hard things to do. In other words, in the face of ignorance and awkwardness it is very hard to look at people and tell them that God forgives them and loves them. It is upsetting to the old order of things and as radical as following the new order of Jesus.

Today, the Catholic community is deeply divided over the passage of President Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The Department of Health and Human Services requires employers to provide preventive medical services for women, including contraception, to its employees. Critics of the mandate claim that the issue is not contraception itself, but government imposing itself on religion. Even given the president's accommodation for Catholic schools, hospitals and charitable and social service agencies, the church remains divided.

The need for the bishops, theologians and the laity to come together and discuss these important issues has never been more pressing. This is particularly true at a time when our nation, and our church, needs informed public debate on a range of moral issues, especially the economy, growing poverty, and the continuing “scandal of glaring inequalities” (Pope Benedict XVI).

I regret that contraception is the issue over which the principle of conscience is being debated. It is unfortunate for two reasons: First, the bishops have been unable to convince the vast majority of Catholics of the validity of the church’s teaching on birth control. Second, once again public discussion of Catholic conscience concerns is restricted to a narrow area of sexual activity. I believe a wider exemption will be necessary to defend against bills concerning life issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

An argument has not been won. Honest disagreement is not resolved by cruel or defensive statements but by loving and compassionate dialogue. This is Jesus’ new order, his way. A way of love and forgiveness even for those who say stupid things when they feel trapped, when their world order is crumbling, when they simply don’t know what to say. Let’s try to remember that new order when we find ourselves on either end of that awkward moment.

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