Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

World Mission Sunday

Anointing of the Sick

October 23, 2011

Picture Jesus surrounded by the Pharisees. A clever lawyer tries to trip Jesus up, outsmart him: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” A tricky question. Why? Because the law had 613 commandments: 248 do’s and 365 don’ts. Many a Pharisee would have nodded sagely, had Jesus stopped after the first sentence, his excerpt from the great prayer in Deuteronomy.

No, it is not with this response that Jesus surprises the Pharisees. What startles them is a “second” commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For Jesus, the neighbor is the despised Samaritan, the idolatrous Gentile, the enemy. It startles them because Jesus weds this commandment to the first, to fashion one twin commandment, “greater” than all the rest. Live these two and you live them all.

A fascinating footnote: At least one of Jesus’ hearers was *not* startled. In Mark’s version, the very lawyer who had put the question reacted like this: “Well said, teacher! To love God with all the heart, and all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And Jesus replied simply: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Now focus on the Last Supper. “A new commandment I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you.” Not just “Love one another.” Not simply “Love one another as you love yourselves.” No, “Love one another as I have loved you.” How did Jesus love us? We can scarcely count the ways. For love of us, he walked the dusty ways of Palestine, healing the sick and raising the dead, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, hungry at times and thirsty, with no set place to rest his head. No greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for a friend.

Compassion is a strong word that dots the pages of Jesus’ life. Literally, it means “suffer with.” You share my agony, my anguish, my pain. Do you know how many children have already died in this decade alone, most from diseases we know how to prevent? According to the Gates Foundation, one hundred and fifty million! Your contribution to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith improves the living conditions of people in nations where poverty, malnutrition, diseases, lack of health care services and education are most serious. This is part of the Church’s mission.

And on this Sunday, the sick and the elderly among us, at Christ Our Hope, call out to each of us, not simply for an anointing by the priest. Individually, and as a community of faith, we are challenged to touch parishioners at particularly crucial moments in their lives – when the once-proud flesh is coming apart or the once-strong spirit has been broken. I am afraid because it may hurt – or already does. I am afraid because I am alone. There is something chillingly lonely about sickness. I am afraid because I may die. And I do not want to die. Because I love life. Here is Gethsemane. Here is another Christ making his or her way to Calvary.

Our task, as a Christian community on this Mission Sunday, is to celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick together and to help each other trudge with Christ to Jerusalem. We become the Christ. We become Christ-like. We too become the healing Christ. *Spe Salvi*. We celebrate Christ Our Hope in whom we are saved.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor