Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 7, 2013

What is unique about today’s Gospel from Luke is the number seventy-two. The other evangelists speak of Jesus sending out his twelve apostles to preach. It’s only Luke who has this story of Jesus sending out seventy-two disciples. The number is significant. In the book of Genesis, Noah’s descendants numbered seventy-two, and the Bible says that after the flood seventy-two people started to spread all over the earth. So, for Luke, the number symbolizes the fact that Jesus was sending his disciples not to only the twelve tribes of Israel, but to the entire world.

So, as we heard, he sends them out two by two, just like the Mormons who walk on our streets. Speaking of which, one day when I was visiting one of our seminarians there was a knock at the door of his rectory. It was wet and cold outside. He opened the door and there were two Mormon missionaries damp and shivering in the cold. They asked if they could come inside. Well, he just couldn’t just leave them standing there, so he said okay. He brought them into the living room and offered them the couch. They were quiet for a long time, so he asked, “What happens now?” The older one said, “We don’t know. We never got this far before.”

What amazed me as I read the commentaries on today’s Gospel is how the commentators all seemed to gloss over verse 9, which says that the disciples were sent to “cure the sick.” The commentators are so anxious to remember that Jesus told them to announce that “the kingdom of God is at hand for you” that they gloss over the fact that we are first called to cure the sick among us. (It would have been a good day to have celebrated the Sacrament of the Sick).

Why do they gloss over this verse? Is it because we live in a time when only professional medical people are called to cure the sick – those who make artificial hearts, those who research the potential healing from stem cells, those doctors and nurses and techs and hospital chaplains who have a professional calling to cure the sick?

But doesn’t that let the rest of us off the hook? After all, by using the number seventy-two, Luke is making sure that we understand Christ’s call that all of us, whether we are professionals or not, are called to cure the sick. We are always surrounded by sick people, in our families, our parish, our communities. How do we respond to the gospel call to cure the sick?

Here, may I offer just two practical ways in which we can all take part in the healing of the sick. First, allow sick persons the freedom to be and to feel and to say what they want. Don’t impose your own fears, your own clichés, your own needs upon them. There is a natural awkwardness when we are confronted with illness, especially a life-threatening one. And so we say awkward and sometimes confusing things. “Well, as I always said, when your time’s up, your time’s up.” This is an awkward example of what the disciple of Christ would not say. Instead, simply say to the sick person, “Tell me about it.” Very simple, very open-ended. But what is *it*? you might ask. Believe me, the sick person will tell you what *it* is on that particular day and *it* will not be the same for every person. This invitation to a sick person is a simple act that helps us to follow our mission, which is to cure.

The second insight I share with you is the power of prayer in curing the sick. Simply tell the sick person in front of you that you will pray for him or her. Cardinal Bernardin wrote from his hospital bed as he was battling with cancer: “Pray now while you’re healthy; it is not always easy to pray when you are sick.” How true that is. But I can assure you the sick person remembers the people who promise them their prayers or who come to visit. Our own Archbishop Murphy dying from leukemia told me he knew everyone who came to visit, but more so those who didn’t come to visit!

So, two simple insights on how we can all cure the sick: give them freedom to speak and give them prayers. This is how we might learn to become disciples and to save, to cure, to heal, like Jesus.

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