

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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The Gospel reading begins with excitement: the excitement of his disciples returning successfully from a bold program to proclaim the coming kingdom. The Gospel reading ends with a picture of immense desperation: of human beings so needy, so hungry for hope that they strain to touch even the fringe of Jesus' cloak.

At first it all looks so reasonably orderly. Jesus sets up a mission project, organizes it well, prepares his disciples and such visioning paid off. Would that be the case the next day! Not so!

Now the disciples need a break -- but they can't even get a bite to eat. So Jesus sensibly plans a retreat. And this is where things begin to come apart. For as they head for their solitude somewhere across the lake, they begin to become victims of their own success. Their excitement has spread to the locals and many of them race ahead around the lake to meet them on the other side.

Instead of a much needed rest -- they are greeted by a huge, restless and needy crowd. Jesus is deeply moved by their need for leadership, for someone to help them -- just as a shepherd brings some modicum of good order and care to mobs of rootless sheep. So he begins that huge task of caring for all of them by teaching them many things.

We are witnessing in the Gospel reading that things are getting out of control. We have moved from the excitement of disciples reporting on an orderly mission project into increasingly desperate crowds mobbing Jesus and pulling on him. Jesus seems to be losing control of the situation.

But it is what Jesus does that gives us hope and light. It is evident that Jesus never really had control in the first place. He didn't have any control on how people would react to his disciples orderly mission project. And as he sought to reach out to the needs of the communities it is obvious he had even far less control.

The need to control life, whether in our personal relationships, or in daily life or even in times of illness when we are so desperate for health and help, points to something deeper. And this is where the phrase "Jesus began to teach them many things" hits home to us.

Surrounded by so many people with so many problems -- their despair over life, their lack of direction, their crying need for healing, for someone just to listen to their sufferings, so many people. And what does Jesus do? "He began to teach them many things"

What does he teach them? Not academic lectures. Not canned sermons. No, he shepherds them with a life-giving Word. In the context of desperation, teaching, doctrines, words are essential in the feeding and nurture and healing of human beings. In our world where religion

is too often associated with right wing ideologies of literal Biblicism, the tendency is to avoid teachings and doctrine altogether. But the Gospel reading this morning places the role of the Word right into the heart of the most desperate human situations.

To help to put all of this into perspective, in the past I have used the analogy of the baseball game. To play the game effectively you have to know the rules of the game, but not academically, not by rote. You learn the rules as a child by being coached as you play the game. And after some experience with the game you can talk about the rules in the context of the joy of playing it.

When Jesus sent out his disciples he gave them a few rules of the game of new life with God and when they returned he conversed with them over the joys and struggles of their new game of reaching out in the name of a God of life-changing love and healing. The Word, the teaching, was not theory but a part of their concrete life experience.

In those desperate times with those desperately spiritually hungry people in today's Gospel reading what did Jesus teach? The text says, "many things." Surely he tries to calm them, to reassure them. The "many things taught" would include saying to them, "Do not be anxious about what you shall eat, or drink or how long you will live. But seek God first and God will take care of all the things you worry about." This love for God and God's deeper love for them is the cornerstone of any living teaching. No wonder the 23rd psalm is always requested at funerals.

Modern secular life had an ideal of rational calm. Modern architecture, with its blocks and blocks of bland urban renewal, purveyed this ideal of secular calm. But under the surface appearance of that calm all is often not so calm. There are lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau said. And to move forward from this has erupted the quest of post-modern spirituality.

This is a point of contact for the reaching out of the church. To break through the secular prejudices against Christianity becomes the task of teaching. People need to get over the "oldness" of the church, for one. Modern secular life is oriented to the new and the trendy. The church looks so old, but this is a curtain not difficult to pull aside by deeds and words of love.

We know also that attitude has a lot to do with the pace or even chance of healing in a person's life. It's how we grab the fringe of Jesus' cloak. Do we grab with our anxieties run amok, in desperation? Or do we reach for his cloak in the grace of faith, in humility and assurance that God will take care of us even in the worst of times? This is what Jesus surely taught the frightened sheep at the shore.

By providing a safe place for people struggling with substance abuse or other demons, we are throwing around the fringe of Jesus' cloak. And in their healing and reassuring dialogs, they have already begun to live the game of God's love in their lives. We only have to make connection with them, to establish relationships of trust, for the teaching moment in the tradition of Jesus in the Gospel reading.

By welcoming the stranger who visits us in worship we are also living the game of life in Christ quite well. By feeding the homeless we imitate Christ in the ancient and honest way. By

breaking into the maudlin madness of modern political culture demanding justice for minorities and the marginalized, much is taught to others about Christ. It is in our ordinary things of life that the teaching opportunities arise.

Such examples show us something of how Jesus taught that huge and anxiety-laden restless crowd -- and teaches us today. This is how to touch the cloak.

Amen

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