

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

January 27, 2007 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Luke 4:21-30

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“Beyond Our Virtues and Vices ”

“Increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love...” So goes the Prayer of the Day. So we pray. So we ask of God.

But how do we grow in faith, hope and love? When we leave this church and the good feelings here and face our jobs or re-enter our daily relationships where can we get more faith, hope and love?

I believe it is helpful to understand first off that these gifts of faith, hope and love are not human accomplishments, not something we produce in ourselves. But we can confuse this distinction so easily. For ordinary life has its versions of faith, hope and love.

I remember I was driving in Connecticut and heard a radio sermon in which the preacher talked of faith as human courage. “When faced with huge challenges,” the preacher said, “we must have courage to tackle them, and that courage is faith.” Well, that is human faith but it is not the gift of faith we implored of God to increase in us. Human faith is a virtue; just as human faithlessness is a vice. The gift of Christian faith is something quite different.

Any human being anywhere has access to the virtue of human faith, human courage. But the faith of the church, and our personal faith, is unique to the Christian way of life. So how do we grow in Christian faith?

In the first reading Jeremiah shows us. And it revolves around paradox. Jeremiah heard God’s call when he was a child and he too lacked ordinary human courage: “O God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child.” And in that honest sense of weakness, paradoxically, he discovered the transcendent gift of a new strength, and then human courage and self-confidence to take on the whole world of Jewish power politics in Jerusalem. It was not faith as courage, as any human being can do. It was in his sense of lacking faith, in his despair, that God spoke a Good Word to him: “You have been chosen and I will protect you.” If we open up our hearts in our weakness, God will provide the gift of faith. Always a gift, never a virtue.

And if you doubt like Jeremiah that you have no faith, that you are only a mere mortal human being, then realize I am here to remind you that your Christian faith is the gift of the

Spirit you have received in your baptism, a gift you are fed upon in these words as Word of God and a gift you are fed upon on the bread and wine of Eucharist. It's not yours, but you have been given that gift from God and by returning to the source, the Word and Sacrament of the church, you are both reminded of this gift and it is increased in you.

A pastor's vocation, my calling, is to remind you of God and of God's gifts of faith, hope and love as distinct from the human virtues with such names. I remind us all and in that sense I am no different to any one of you, for I need reminder too. But, paradoxically, because that is my unique vocation, that of the reminding one, I am distinguished from you as ordained by God and the church.

It is when the paradox is dropped or forgotten that things go wrong in the relationship between pastor and congregation. Pastors forget the paradox usually from a lack of humility when they slip into the illusion that they have some special class status or privilege. The congregation forgets the paradox when they look at the pastor as a mere ecclesiastical functionary. In both cases they have forgotten the truths of the Scripture this morning and have forgotten to pray for the increase of the spiritual gifts.

In Chicago, I caused quite a stir when I told the congregation I cannot "go native" with them. I come from beyond as it were as a pastor of the whole church, I am with you for a certain joyous length of time, and then I am called onward by the whole church.

In this respect, like Jeremiah, I have a lonely calling in that by virtue of ordination I can never be completely the local person. I will live life fully with you, drink a glass wine and share meals and a joke with you, honor you and will always listen to you for you have an equally valid but different perspective than mine. I will grow as pastor of St. Francis from the experience of ministry with you, for I too pray for God to "increase in me the gifts of faith, hope, and love." But I am still ordained to remind us of God's ways.

In the Gospel reading Jesus could not go native either, even in Nazareth his hometown. Jesus had changed, been changed by God, and upon his return home brought a Word of God to his home people that "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."

And to demonstrate how painfully he knew this to be true he made the point that God was not always with the hometown folk, but with those whom the hometown folk hated. Referring to Scripture, Jesus taught that among all the desperate Jewish widows, God sent the prophet to a *Gentile* widow instead; that God, among all the needy lepers of Israel, went to the aid of Naaman, *another Gentile*.

Jesus' Word did not engender any human virtue of love from his very own people, but rage and threat. Here Jesus was showing that those who are called to bring the Word of God cannot go completely native even though they are to learn the ways and traditions of any local

culture, love and respect them, but also critique them by the Word of God that is as inclusive as it is a unique gift from God. That is the loneliness of being ordained and, paradoxically, the great honor of being pastor to you.

Finally, we should say something about that love passage of the second reading. This passage is often read lovingly at weddings. In some weddings I must confess I have wondered whether this kind of love would last the wedding night, let alone the marriage. I do not dishonor this human virtue of love. It is a fine quality of character. With so much hate in this world, let's have human love.

But the love of which Paul speaks is more than the human virtue of being loving. Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts not human virtues. Paul's Jesus did not hate in return for that hate from Nazareth, Jerusalem or Rome. So deep was Christ's love for the human race that he loves us all the more. Like faith, to love that deeply is not of our own making, but a gift from God whose roots lie deeper in the divine love shown in the cross of Jesus Christ; tasted in the Eucharist. This divine love dresses the truly noblest quality of human love with a robe of righteousness, but not self-righteousness. Indeed it is a love that is almost anonymous. Perhaps that's why Jesus never wrote anything. A love so deep that it is anonymous with the paradox that so much is written about him.

"Increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love," we pray. Open your heart to receive that increase of faith in the midst of despair, discouragement or spiritual hunger. Open your heart to receive the increase of hope for your life and for this broken world. Open your heart to learn how to love to the point of self-*un*importance. Gifts of God for the people of God. Amen

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