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During the 10 years before I came to Spokane in around 2005, I worked in Portland, for five years I was the Vice Principal at the Jesuit high school there and then for five more I was Principal and President of a Jesuit middle school called St. Andrew Nativity School which I helped open.

While both those jobs kept me busy, I also found time to indulge my passion for acting by appearing in two or three year plays each year.

Between the impact of the stroke that hit me in 2014 on my mobility and the smaller number of theater companies here, I haven't had the ability to do that here in Spokane.

My favorite playwright to perform has always been Shakespeare. For me there is just no other English playwright who creates such fascinating characters and gives them such wonderful things to say.

One of the qualities about Shakespeare that I enjoy is his ability to use the first few moments of a play to focus the audience's attention on the most important conflicts that the play they're about to see will dramatize.

This spring I will be playing the villain in a production of Much Ado About Nothing in Spokane. MUCH ADO is a comedy about the war between the sexes fought by two great characters named Benedick and Beatrice, so it begins with a verbal skirmish between Beatrice and a single male soldier who enters a stage populated by four women. Hamlet deals with deception and hypocrisy so it begins with 3 friends suspiciously questioning one another's identity on the dark, fog-bound battlements of a castle as they argue about the reality of ghost which some of them claim to have seen.

One Shakespearean role which I've always wanted to play, but for which I'm afraid I am now far too old and broken is the title character in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* is probably one of Shakespeare's least performed plays. It's set in ancient Rome and has a very large cast, so it's expensive to stage. It's also a political tragedy with very little humor and almost no romance, so theater companies don't think it will appeal to Americans. And the hero himself is an arrogant jerk whom it's very difficult to like. But that's not why I mention *Coriolanus* today. I mention it because in its first scene Shakespeare alludes very specifically to today's Second Reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. I also mention *CORIOLANUS* because just as Shakespeare does in the first scene of that play, Luke begins his story of Jesus' public ministry in today's Gospel with a story that encapsulates the problems that await Jesus when he preaches the message of a Kingdom of God which includes ALL people.

Coriolanus begins with a riot. The citizens of Rome are up in arms because they believe the Senate has set the price of wheat artificially high in order to make profits for themselves at the expense of the people.

An old Senator named Menenius tries to quell the riot by telling a fable inspired by the reading we just heard from St. Paul about a revolt by all the other members of the body against the belly. Menenius says that once upon a time the leg, the eye, the heart, and company decided that the belly was a greedy do-nothing and so they began attacking it. But the belly calmed the situation by pointing out that while the other parts of the body did appear to do all the work while it just lay around eating, in reality, the other members would have been unable to do anything without the nourishment the belly sent them. The belly even claimed that it was actually the **least** selfish member of the body, since it gave away everything it possessed to the rest of the body and kept nothing for itself. The angry mob is not impressed with this little story and they are even less impressed with Coriolanus when he threatens to beat them up if they don't accept it. So much less impressed, in fact, that they attempt to throw him off a cliff, just as the people of Nazareth almost do to Jesus in today's Gospel.

The Nazareans in the Synagogue turn against Jesus because he tells them something they don't want to hear: He tells them that being God's "chosen people" does not make them God's **only** people. He reminds them that according to their own Hebrew Scriptures there were times when God showed as much or more care for Gentiles than he did for Jewish people with similar problems. Well, it turns out the Church Crowd in Nazareth was not exactly open to the idea that God might love people whom they had spent their lives considering to be sinful and inferior. So they decide that a good response to Jesus for telling them that God does would be to kill him, which, if you think about it, sums up Jesus' religious career pretty handily, because getting killed for telling religious people things they didn't want to hear could be the Cliff Notes summary of Jesus' life.

All of the readings today remind us that God's love is not restricted to any particular individual or group. The second reading from Corinthians reminds us that that we each have different gifts, but that God is much less judgmental than Santa and so no one is going to get lewith an empty stocking or a lump of coal just for being different. In the first reading we see Nehemiah, who was the governor of Israel after the Jews returned to Israel from Babylon, and the high priest Ezra bringing the Israelites together to remind them of the shared heritage which they might have forgotten during their nearly one thousand years of exile in Babylon. Nehemiah and Ezra do not huddle together with a select group of the religious elite to discuss this off in some secret corner of the Temple. They gather **All** the people **together** and tell them **ALL** to rejoice in their **shared** identity as the people of God. And while all the people in this story are Jewish, any Israelite hearing this story would know that it does not celebrate only the Israelites. The only reason these people are back in their homeland is that the Persian king Cyrus the Great—who was as Gentile as the day is long—allowed them to return home from the Babylonian Exile--An act for which the Prophet Isaiah calls him a Messiah of God, and for which he is honored with a gold-plated statue next to the altar at the Jesuit church in Prague alongside those of other Biblical liberators like Moses.

In the second reading, Paul is dealing with the Corinthians, who much preferred dividing themselves into mutually exclusive and antagonistic sects and cliques to building upon their shared identity as Christians. Paul tries to make the Corinthians understand that nothing could possibly matter less than divisive human categories like ethnicity or social class when trying to understand who people are in the light of God's grace.

Finally, just as last Sunday we saw **John's** version of the beginning of Jesus' public career at the Wedding Feast of Cana, And as Shakespeare shows us that the Roman people are just aching for a chance to bring Coriolanus down a peg or twelve in the opening moments of that play, today we see **Luke** using the story of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth to foreshadow that ministry's going to take.

And in Luke's opening, as is true throughout his Gospel, **inclusion** is the foundation of Jesus' message. God's love is not bound by human categories of "us" and "them."

Other Christians have shared their experiences of Christ with Luke and he has written a Gospel to share those experiences with Theophilus, whose name is Greek for something like "God's love."

Luke says that Jesus regularly goes to the synagogue, the spiritual center of his village, Even though I suspect that he disagreed with many of the sermons preached there each week, Jesus does not sit in the back and luxuriate in thoughts of his own spiritual superiority. Jesus jumps right into the community at large by volunteering to be the lector. And to announce himself as the Messiah, he does not choose a text which celebrates the Messiah as a lofty, triumphant monarch like Steve Reeves or Cyrus the Great. Instead he chooses a prophetic vision of the inclusion of social outcasts and the destruction of social injustice.

The kingdom of God announced by Jesus is not a country club at which only the spiritually and theologically perfect are welcome. It's more like a barbecue at which shepherds, tax collectors, bikers, and prostitutes are every bit as welcome as archangels and Kings.

Coriolanus never thinks that way about Rome. Consequently, at the end of his play he dies a lonely exile surrounded by enemies—in exactly the sort of divided world whose division he devoted his life to intensifying. Let us pray that each of us, our nation, and our Church will always be wiser than Caius Marcius Coriolanus.