

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Conflict

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Conflict. Conflict is endemic to our lives. No one likes it-- conflict poisons our peace, it disrupts our relationships, it can bring out the worst in us. Yet Jesus warns us today that he has not come to save us from conflict, any more than he has come to save us from suffering. But how can conflict be salvific?

Take the plight of Jeremiah in today's first reading. Have there been times when we too have been thrown into a cistern to rot? Have there been times when we too have felt walls hemming us in on all sides? It reminds me of what I read about Jesus' homeland in the morning newspaper--the Jews are trapped, terrorized by the Palestinians, the Palestinians are trapped, locked down by the Jews. Both see themselves at the bottom of a pit, with the other jeering them from above.

It reminds me of the tone of grievance that characterizes so much of our political and moral discourse in this country. All claim to be abused by the other side. Its safer really. Who can criticize the victim for complaining about their suffering? But its also a trap--a trap because we end up seeing ourselves as a victim, powerless, abandoned in an empty cistern.

It reminds me of a parable I heard from a psychologist. When you find yourself in a hole, its no good for someone to give you a ladder if you only use it to dig deeper.

Martin Luther King offered a different approach for dealing with conflict, an approach which he drew from today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Hebrews. Life is a race, a marathon, I would say, and through the conflicts which beset us, Martin Luther King says, we must keep our eyes on the prize. We must not allow our enemies to deflect us. We cannot allow our enemy to provoke us. We cannot allow the enemy to dictate our behavior. Think back over the great speeches of Martin Luther King--how many of them were about being abandoned at the bottom of a cistern? They were rather about keeping faith, sustaining hope and broadening our love beyond our own circle to encompass the Blessed Community of all of God's children.

Martin Luther King was a prophet of non-violence. And yet he engendered conflict. One might think that non-violence is about avoiding conflict. But its rather about engaging in conflict honestly and openly, resisting the seductive short-cuts of either scapegoating the other or playing the victim. Its about asserting oneself, its about speaking the truth aloud before those who would intimidate and shame us into silence. Its about faith--faith in oneself and too faith in the other, that the relationship between us can bear the honesty and integrity it takes to speak the truth and truly care for one another.

Jesus warns us that the Gospel will bring conflict into our lives. It will bring conflict because it will bring change, and change is hard. The Gospel calls for conversion, conversion calls for us to change our expectations for ourselves, requiring others to change their expectations of us. Spawning conflict.

I hate conflict. I avoid it whenever I can. But I also hate what avoiding conflict can do to me--how it can make me feel trapped, alone at the bottom of an empty cistern. Better to

persevere in running the race that lies before me, better for us all, to keep our eyes on the prize. “I have come to set the earth on fire” Jesus says, “how I wish it were already ablaze.”

May the Spirit of Jesus feed our own wary and weary spirits. May God’s Spirit inspire us to be bold, filled with the faith and the hope to persevere in our call to love with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength. May we be blessed by such a great grace.