

Twentysixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

What's Real

September 30, 2018

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Priorities—today's readings address our priorities in life. Not what's important, but what's most important. What's essential..

My students are trying to learn what their priorities are, what they want to do with their lives. My fear is that some of them will make their decision on the basis of what will make them the most money or bring them the most status. They do not think they are being selfish, they think they are being realistic. But why is it that the "real" world is always a harsh world? Whose version of the golden rule is he who has the gold makes the rules. Why is realism so often cynicism? Is that really our reality?

How we see the "real" world makes a difference. It shapes what we do. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like the disciples of Moses or Jesus in today's readings. If we see the world in terms of us and them, insiders and outsiders, then that becomes our reality. Take or get taken. Fight or lose. The "real" world is only dominated by money or power when we allow money and power to run our own lives and then excuse ourselves by telling ourselves that everyone does it, that you have to live that way to get ahead. Cynicism creates its own reality.

But so too does love. Suffering can embitter, can lead to calls for vengeance against those who must then avenge themselves in turn. But suffering can also school us in compassion, can calls us to reach out to those whose sufferings we can understand only too well. Who in turn are drawn to respond in kind. Which lesson we learn is really up to us. What kind of person we want to become is up to us.

In today's Gospel Jesus is asking us to decide what kind of person we want to be. To set our priorities. Some worry though that to be concerned about ourselves is already to be selfish. But this is due to a misunderstanding of who we are. For as Paul reminds us, we are not ourselves by ourselves, rather, we are knit together through a web of relationships to friend and family, neighbor and co-worker. Who we are is even shaped by those on the periphery, the

down and out, and the stranger. We say maturity is about autonomy, but none of us are fully autonomous; we need resources and allies if we are ever to accomplish anything. We are less like diamonds, pure and invulnerable, than we are like blankets of interwoven patches sewn together like one of Lee's quilts. Who we are depends in part on them. And they in turn are who they are in part thanks to us..

There is a Jewish saying attributed to an old rabbi who was challenged to justify his faith in God given all the evil and suffering in the world. He responded "I would rather believe in the existence of a loving God and be wrong, than not believe and be right."

So too is it not better to believe that the "real" world is animated by love even if in the end we find out we were wrong than to be cynical about the real world and end up right. For in the end, even if we have not gotten the world right, we have at least gotten our own souls right, and not only our lives, but also the lives of all we have touched, thanked, blessed. Finding our true self involves not merely living our life, but in our life generating new life all around us. Our calling while unique to each one of us is not meant for you and I alone, its meant for the whole world, the real world.

God has not finished with us yet. And the suffering and conflict all around us teaches us that God is not finished with the rest of his creation either. Rather he is calling upon us to pitch in and help to complete his work of creation, to join him in bringing light into what still remains dark, in bringing healing to what still remains broken and so to transform our ambiguous twilight world of light and shadow into the radiant brilliance of the glory of God.