

Homily for 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Feb. 1st, 2016

All you need is Love! We don't need John Lennon to tell us that. Or perhaps we do, since we always seem to be forgetting it! Yet, it is the Scriptures that so continually, forcefully and eloquently remind us. For example, Jesus makes it clear when he says: All the Law, and all the Prophets, depend on these two intimately related commandments: Love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Or poignantly, as his Last Will and Testament according to the Gospel of John: One New Commandment I give you: to love one another, as I have loved you! By this will all people know that you are my disciples—or not!—if you have love for one another! Or St. Paul in the reading today: If I have all faith, if I speak the tongues of angels, if I give away all I have, and my body to be burned, yet do not have love, it profits me nothing. Nothing! Or, as he says to the Romans: All the commandments are summed up in this: Love your neighbor as yourself; so, Love is the fulfillment of the Law. And John, in his First Letter, is perhaps the most striking of all: Whoever loves is born of God, and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God; for, God IS Love. And finally, that famous saying of St. Augustine: Love, and do what you will!

What could be simpler and clearer? So, why have we done such a lousy job? Why do we keep messing it up? Well, that is exactly why: it is so simple and clear. The ego doesn't like that. Whether corporate or individual, the ego loves distinct and dualistic categories that it can manage, manipulate and control, and that allows it to feel superior. We like to create categories that judge and exclude. Love, on the other hand, is boundless and limitless, and knows no categories. That is why institutions, whether political or religious, which thrive on categories, will always be threatened by it. This is exactly why, in the first reading today, when God commissions Jeremiah as his prophet, he is warned that the "kings, princes and priests" will stand up and resist him. And Jesus himself is an exact proof of this. Who, after all, were the ones who resisted and crucified him? The Roman political authorities, and his own religious high priests! He was going around breaking rules, and preaching a love without boundaries, and that threatened their whole system.

Empires, whether political or religious, are invested in the status quo. As Richard Rohr has pointed out, empires cannot afford too much love, mercy, or forgiveness! Love, on the other hand, has no limits to its intensity and breadth, and will thus always challenge the status quo. For empires, disobedience and disloyalty will be more serious offenses than even violence and cruelty. Indeed, empire and violence are inseparable, so that we wind up actually preferring violence to love. Just think of the bad old days of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in the American military. I'll never forget the apparently true saying of a soldier who said: "I was given a medal for killing a man, and a discharge for loving one!" What a skewing and skewering of authentic values! We wind up sending our men overseas, and they come back inevitably and understandably traumatized in body and soul, even to the point of suicide, whereas we imagine

the whole fabric of society, and the very structure of the universe, is threatened if one man loves another! Really?? Or just reflect on the whole realm of sexual love, about which we speak far too little in an appreciative manner. Something which is, or should be, tender, vulnerable, joyful and playful, gets surrounded by all sorts of sanctions and scruples, so that we wind up feeling doubtful, shameful, guilty and self-conscious. I wonder just how much sexual violence and dysfunction in our world is the result of the fear and anger and frustration wrought on us by these strictures from church and society! And so violence actually becomes an attribute of God Himself! Just remember the innumerable passages, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, in which God is ordering the wholesale extermination of peoples and animals in the Promised Land. Do we really imagine this is a revelation of God's own intimate desire, and not a projection of our own cruelty and greed? Or even in the standard teaching of moral theology in decades past: God is actually someone who would torture you for all eternity for a single relatively minor infraction! How could we possibly ever love or trust such a God? Who would want to spend a single hour, much less all eternity, with such a God? That is why we must be thankful we finally have a pope who is scolding bishops and priests for their cold insistence on abstract rules and principles, and insisting instead on the abundant outpouring of mercy, love and grace which is the very essence of God and of Life. Why, though, should we need a special Year of Mercy for something that should have been in the forefront of our hearts, minds and lives for the past two thousand years?

A perfect example of this descent into darkness is found in today's Gospel. Here we have the relatives and associates of Jesus, his own townspeople, fine, ordinary, upstanding folk, who begin by "speaking well of him", and "marveling at the gracious words that proceed from his mouth." Then, very quickly, everything changes. Why? Because he threatens the status quo, socio-politically, psychologically and religiously. "There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah the prophet," he says, "yet not one of them was helped, but only a widow from Zarephath in Sidon." It wasn't someone who belonged to our community, the right community, God's own people, who received his mercy, but this woman—which is already subversive!—who was a foreigner. And then it gets worse, as he goes even further: "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." It would be like saying to Israel today: I love the Palestinians as much as you. Yet it is even more infuriating than that! If you read the Book of Kings, where this story is told, you see that Naaman was not only a foreigner, but a general who had invaded Israel! He is an enemy military commander! And he was the one who was healed! What? Does God not respect God's own categories of who are his people, who the chosen, who are deserving? NO! God does not respect those categories, at all! And so those fine upstanding people of Nazareth suddenly become a murderous mob, dragging Jesus to the brow of the hill, and threatening to hurl him over the cliff! And what does it take to turn them into a murderous mob? The threatening of their status quo, of their cherished categories. And what would it take to turn us fine upstanding people into a murderous mob? Donald Trump? We had better be careful!

As Paul reminds us in the second reading today: When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child. When I became a man—if I did!—I put away childish things! Are we finally willing to grow up, psychologically and spiritually, and put away childish things? Are we willing to allow God to expand our hearts and minds, to “know the length and breadth and height and depth” of Christ’s Love, and be “filled with the very fullness of God,” as Paul says to the Ephesians? It is a crucial question for ourselves personally, for the Church, and for the world. When are we going to grow up?