

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B - 2024

A number of months ago, Sr. Carolyn Coll of the Sisters of Mercy and who is a member of our parish, felt a deep calling to do something for the homeless in Gastonia. As her 78th birthday was approaching, she responded to that call by asking that her gift be to feed these homeless. So a few days later, some of the other Sisters of Mercy made 100 sandwiches while other friends donated bottles of water, bags of chips and fruit. Sr. Carolyn then brought this to the homeless in Gastonia wherever they could find them. But it didn't stop there. It was such an impactful experience that they decided to do it again the following month...and then the month after that...now going out every second Wednesday of the month. And they started distributing bags of toiletries, clothes and blankets, anything they may need to survive the winter. It has now morphed into a formal ministry called Wheels of Blessings. Jeanmarie and I and a number of other parishioners are privileged to be working with them.

But while the food and the other items are important, the most important thing is the love and care that the team brings to those who are served. Sister Carolyn taught us all through her actions to treat all of these people with dignity, to treat them not as people to be pitied and given a handout, but people to be loved as brothers and sisters. We learned it is just as important to talk with them, to ask their names and give them ours and to not be afraid to give them a hug. There is no judgment, no thought of why these people are homeless, no thought at all of whether they are deserving of such love and care. Why? because we are all called to treat them the same way Jesus would treat them, the same way he treats the leper in today's gospel. Hold that thought.

In today's second reading, St. Paul is providing some instruction to the Corinthians as to how they are to conduct themselves when engaging with people who do not share the same background or have not yet accepted the Gospel. Corinth was a major port city whose streets were filled with people from all over the cities that lined the Mediterranean Sea, so there were many Greeks, Cretans, Egyptians, Carthaginians, Jews, Arabs as well as the ever present Romans. The burgeoning church which Paul had planted still had regular interactions with all of these people, people they did regular business with and people whom they would consider friends so they would likely break bread with them. So in this context, Paul is giving them guidance on how to behave in these circumstances.

To better understand this context, we need to look at the verses that come before this reading. Paul is speaking to them about the foods they should and shouldn't eat, specifically when gathered together with these others who don't share the same beliefs. As you know, the Jews had very strict dietary customs that were laid out under Moses in the Book of Leviticus, part of which we hear in today's first readings. There were then and continue to be rules about which foods they were not permitted to eat and these rules were rigorously followed. So as the Corinthians learned about the Gospel and both Jesus' and Paul's Jewish heritage, there was some confusion. The instructions Paul gives them seem to be counter to what the Jews were practicing. But Paul explains to them that it is okay to eat these things if their hosts provide them so as not to make the hosts or others feel uncomfortable. This is what Paul means by conscience. He does note the exception of meat that comes from animals sacrificed to idols. But this is to not make the person who points this out feel uncomfortable. In

such a way, Paul is echoing Jesus who said “It is not what goes into a man’s mouth that defiles but what comes out of the man’s mouth that defiles.” This teaching is summed up in the reading we heard earlier, that these early Christians are to be more welcoming and accepting of others without judging them, certainly not by what they eat. And importantly, to do all of this for the glory of God. Paul finishes this lesson by telling them to be imitators of him, as he is an imitator of Jesus.

And it is that trait of Jesus which Paul is imitating here as depicted in today’s gospel. A leper comes and kneels before Jesus to ask for healing. He makes a wonderful statement of faith that if Jesus wills that he be healed, it will happen. Jesus immediately reaches out to the man, touches him and says he does will it and the man is healed. Put yourself in this scene for a moment, perhaps as one of the Apostles. Jesus is physically touching a leper. I can only imagine the dropped jaws and sheer terror the apostles might have been feeling at that moment. Were they asking themselves if Jesus might become a leper as well? ...And what of the leper himself? Jesus might well of been the first person to actually touch this man in a very long time. That action alone might have gone a long way to restore this man’s dignity. But it’s what Jesus didn’t do that had equally restorative effects. He did not recoil from the man in fear that he might catch the disease. And he didn’t reprimand the leper for not following the law of Moses which we heard in today’s first reading that he cry out “Unclean” to warn Jesus and the disciples that he was approaching. Nor does Jesus put any conditions on the healing. He does not inquire if the man is worthy of healing, if he is a good Jew who keeps the Commandments and follows all the laws. In fact, Jesus never asks this of anyone he heals. Instead, Jesus

is filled with compassion and ministers to him immediately with his healing touch. This is the sort of compassion and hospitality that Paul entreats the Corinthians to emulate.

We too are called to emulate Jesus in such a way, to reach out to those in need without considering if they are worthy of our assistance or our prayers. How many times have we all seen someone on the street in need and hesitated, wondering if they would use what we give them for drugs or alcohol. And if we do give them something, we do it and quickly move on. To quote a line in a song by Mary Chapin Carpenter “We give a dollar as we pass and hope our eyes don’t meet.” It’s not wrong and we all do it from time to time, because it is - well - uncomfortable.

But perhaps we are being called to something deeper, something Pope Francis refers to a lot: Encuentro or encounter. In explaining this, he said “The Church... is called to go out from its comfort zone and be a leaven of communion; communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope.”

Who more seeks a future of hope than those who spend most of their days in seemingly hopeless situations? This then, is our opportunity to more closely imitate Jesus.

As we prepare for Lent starting Wednesday, perhaps we think more deeply about what we choose to give up for Lent, which is a time for prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Let’s all try to spend some time in prayer this week to discern what it is we truly need to give up. Then let’s try to fast from our discomfort in reaching out to others and do it with the same love and compassion which Jesus did. And let us prayerfully consider what alms we

can give to those in need and perhaps in doing so, give them a little bit of healing as well.