

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Today I am going to tell a number of stories in an attempt to bring a fresh look to this familiar passage from Deuteronomy and Mark.

Hear O, Israel. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself

So proclaims the ancient teaching before Jesus and reaffirmed once more by Jesus. How does such love begin?

There is the story of a man named Ted who had fallen in with a drug dealer in Alberta and dreamed up a scheme to make some truly big bucks. Ted thought that things were working out just fine—making good contracts, setting up a network—but one day he and his drug dealer colleague were cruising down the road when the drug dealer saw a man traveling in the opposite direction. "I need to kill him," said the dealer quite matter-of-factly, reaching for a gun that was stashed under the front seat.

"It was right then I decided to get out," said Ted, badly shaken, "This was over my head."

And that is where the path to love and salvation begins, in the sudden awareness that a particular path is leading to death, in the naming of something that is wrong and taking steps to get away from it. The saints are people who, having flirted with sin, like Paul of Tarsus or Francis of Assisi, come to such an awareness. The saints are those who heard today's gospel as if for the first time and embraced that truth that love of God and neighbor are the real directives of life and humbly realize that they have far to go.

When the poet Maya Angelou appeared on **The Today Show** several years ago, she was asked about her lifetime goals. She answered, "I want to become a Christian." This surprised the show's host, who asked, "But aren't you already a Christian?" To which the poet replied, "When people come up to me and say they are Christians, I think, 'Oh my, already?'"

To become a saint, a Christian, is an ongoing process. And it happens in the way Rabbi Harold Kushner points out: "When people ask me 'Where is God?' I tell them I would rather rephrase the question to '**When** is God?' God is there when we love him and our neighbour."

As in this story: a woman was in great distress because she had lost the sense of God in her life. "Why doesn't God make me feel that he is there? If only I could feel him, know that he touched me." And the old woman to whom she was complaining said to her, "Pray to God. Ask God to touch you. He will put his hand on you." The woman closed her eyes and began to pray earnestly and suddenly she felt the hand of God touching her! She cried out, "He touched me!" and went into an ecstasy of joy. But then she paused and said, "But you know, it felt just like your hand."

And the old woman replied. "Of course it did. It was my hand." "It was?" "Sure, what did you think God would be doing? Did you think he would extend a long arm out of heaven to touch you? He just took the hand that was nearest and used that."

Like the story of the woman who, during the course of earning her master's degree, found it necessary to commute several times a week from the town of Eastman, in the Townships, to Bishop's University, in Lennoxville, a good 81 Km away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of, Chemin Georges Bonnallie, her road. He was always there, in subzero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no

acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree. She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening—what stubborn habit, private grief, or mental disorder.

Finally, she asked a neighbour of hers, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?" "Oh, yes," said her neighbour. "Many times."

"Is he...a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?" "He's no more touched than you or me," her neighbour laughed. "And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your tail lights disappear around the bend and he knows you're okay, he goes home to bed."

Like the story of the woman, both divorced and an unwed mother, who, in the 1920s, worked for a series of leftist publications and lived a bohemian lifestyle in New York's Greenwich Village. Then one day she realized that she was in over her head, and so in 1927 she, of all people, became a Catholic and then led a quiet rebellion within the church to reach out to the poor, the needy, and the desperate. She was a pacifist, an anarchist, and a

crusader for social justice, not your standard-issue saint. And yet right now her name is in fact being processed for canonization, even though in her lifetime she perceptively said she didn't want to become a saint because, in her words, she didn't want "to be dismissed that easily." Which is to say, once you put the label "saint" to a person's name, we say, "Oh, well, he or she could do those things because, after all, they were saints. But that's not for me."

She didn't want people to think that what she did was extraordinary because what she did, loving God and neighbour, was in fact to be the ordinary way any Christian should live. She protested that loving God and neighbour wasn't meant to be unusual or artificially elevated to the stuff of sainthood, out of the reach of ordinary people. It was simply what every day Christians were meant to do. This woman is Dorothy Day, whom the archbishop of New York called, "a model for all in the third millennium."

The law and the prophets, Jesus says, are summed up in loving God and neighbour. This is not something over and above daily life, but the very kernel and heart of daily life, the springboard for our actions, the basis for our decisions, the grounding of our prayer life, the

motivation of our careers, the purpose of our being here to begin with.

I suspect that if people today have trouble discovering where God is, it is because they have not experienced **when** God is. The gospel invites us to show them.

Deacon Gerry

