

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: True Love

Fr. Smith had had enough. This last week pushed him over the edge. First there were the kids who got arrested for having alcohol at a party. Then there were the adults who mounted a smear campaign against an unwed mother. Then he went into Church and found that the poor boxes had been broken into. Fr. Smith had had it with these people. He decided it was time to let it rip. So he stood up there in the pulpit and yelled out. "You people, with your lying, your drinking, your cheating, your stealing ways. If you keep this up you are going to go to hell. Is that what you want? Do you want to go to hell! Stand up if you want to go to hell." There was a hush in the church. You could have heard a pin drop. Suddenly, John Jones stood up. Everyone gasped. Jones was one of the kindest, most devout members of the parish. And he stood up. Fr. Smith was beside himself. "Jones, do you want to go to hell?"

"No, father."

"Then, why did you get up, man."

"Well, father, I didn't think it was right that you were the only one standing."

As silly as this joke is, it contains a horrible truth. That truth does not involve what some of those people were doing. The horrible truth of the joke is that the lack of love in the priest, his using condemnation and meanness to get a point across, is self-defeating. There is no love in his guidance. There is no charity in his words.

We are surrounded by so much vitriol. Political parties don't just disagree, they express hatred for each other. Hate mongers feel empowered to unleash their venom. Last year I drove by a white supremacist hate truck. I could not believe the horrible things plastered all over the truck. The venom was directed at at least half of our parish. It was sickening. When we come to Church, we want to find a sanctuary from all this. I don't want, you don't want, a religion that grounds itself in fear and hatred.

The priest in the story is more than just the butt of a joke. He reflects many people of the present time, as well as the past times, who show absolutely no charity in the presentation of what they consider the teaching of the Church. I receive emails all the time from people who say that we priests should be hammering people with what these people think the truth is. They claim that the Church is run by immoral people. They relegate every priest and bishop who does not bow to their distorted views as purveyors of immorality. I am disgusted by web-sites that promote to be written by real Catholics, but through their hostility, their lack of love, are questionable as Christians, followers of Christ. They certainly are not the real Catholics they purport to be. Of course, there is no use in arguing with these people because they are basically Gnostic. The ancient heresy of Gnosticism never went away. The Gnostic believes that he or she has the inner knowledge, secret knowledge. If you don't agree with them, that's because you have not been given the gift of what they call true knowledge. But they don't have inner knowledge. In fact, they don't have any knowledge at all, at least not the gift of the Holy Spirit that is knowledge.

A Church that bashes people in the head is not the Church that Jesus came to found. I don't want to be part of a Church that spews hatred. Nor do you. Nor did St. Paul. The beginning of today's second reading from 1 Corinthians 12, talks about the foundation of our faith. The foundation of our faith is Jesus Christ, and Jesus is Love. Listen again to what Paul says:

*If I speak in human and angelic tongues,
but do not have love,
I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.
And if I have the gift of prophecy,
and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge;
if I have all faith so as to move mountains,
but do not have love, I am nothing.
If I give away everything I own,
and if I hand my body over so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

We are accustomed to a disconnect between appearance and reality. We are used to learning that this or that person is very rich, or very famous, and at the same time a pathetic human being. We know that we could have riches, fame or power and be miserable people.

What we are less accustomed to realizing is that there can be a disconnect between the appearance of greatness and reality when it comes to spiritual things. Someone can be rich in religious experiences, someone can prophesy or speak in tongues, and still be a self aggrandizing misfit. Someone can be famous for care for the poor, and still be a pathetically swollen ego of a person. Someone can even have the power to perform miracles, heal the sick or move mountains, and still be rotten to the core with arrogance and pride. Someone might look to be truly something, and yet still be nothing.

No human person can be anything unless he or she reflects the image of the Creator. *Our God is a consuming fire*, we read in *Hebrews 12:29*. He is a consuming fire of love. Without love, no matter what other kind of apparent greatness a person may have, in reality that person is nothing. But with the all consuming love of God, our actions can transform the world. And we can be something, sons and daughters of God.

You and I are only something if we are on fire with love. Our actions only have meaning if they are rooted in His Love. Our faith, our religion, is only worthwhile if it brings the love to the world.

Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God. This is a Kingdom of love. This love is not a warm feeling of affection that tries to please everybody and never rock the boat. Rather, it is a courageous love, willing to get killed in order to bring good to those it loves. True love, God's love, embraces everybody. That kind of love is something!

And we are nothing unless we have it.

We are the Church. We are the ones empowered to establish the Kingdom of God. We need to put up a fight against the vitriol of our times. We can bring God's love to the world. We must be people grounded in His love.