

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: On Becoming a Christian

In 1927 my grandfather, my father's father died. My dad was just 10 years old. his older brother was 13. His four sisters were 11, 8, 5, and 2. My grandmother was in her mid 30's. There was no welfare, no child support, no social security. Then the depression hit. My father and my uncle and aunts not only survived, but as individuals and as family they prospered. How was this possible? It was possible because their neighbors felt a deep responsibility to help the widow, Minnie Pellegrino, and her children. When someone picked the string beans in their back yard, a portion would go to Minnie. When someone bought butter from the farmer, a portion was cut and sent to Minnie. If someone bought a piece of pork, the widow Pellegrino's portion was cut first before the mother did the cooking. If they needed some sewing to be done, they let Minnie do it, so she could make a little money while she watched her little ones. There was no written law that detailed exactly what the neighbors had to do. It was the common sense realization that they could not be the people God wanted them to be unless they helped those who hurt.

And a lawyer asked Jesus in an attempt to trip him up, "Teacher, which is the greatest of the laws," and Jesus responded, "'You shall love the Lord with your whole heart and whole soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments the whole law is based and the prophets as well.

The heart of Christian morality is the desire to love God fully, completely, and to love others as unique reflections of God's love. We can see an analogy in the love we must have in the love that good parents have for their children. Parents do not try to find the minimal amount of love they must have to be good parents. Parents continually give their love because they know their children need their love. Parents do not love their children because they are afraid that if they do not love their children God will punish them. Parents love their children because they are their children. Parents love their children for whom they are, expressions of love, loving them back. Parents do not love their children due to their looks, talents, or intelligence. They love them because they are their children. God loves us because we are His children.

Jesus is not calling us to be minimalists. He is calling us to love God and neighbor completely, without counting the cost.

The poet Maya Angelou was once asked what her lifetime goals were. She answered that she wanted to become a Christian. Maya Angelou was a Christian. Her point was that Christianity is an ongoing process of becoming. Everyday we take steps to becoming a Christian.

And everyday God uses people to find Him.

There is a story about a college girl who was in great distress because she had

loss a sense of God in her life. Her grandmother was very much the spiritual leader of the family, so the girl visited her and complained, "Why doesn't God let me feel His presence? If only I could feel Him and know that He has touched me."

Her grandmother said, "Pray to God, right now. Close your eyes and pray to him. Ask Him to put out his hand and touch you. But no matter what happens, keep your eyes closed." The girl closed her eyes and prayed fervently. Then she felt a hand on her hand. "He touched me. He touched me," she cried out, her eyes still closed. Then she said, "Wait, this hand feels like your hand."

"Of course it is my hand," her grandmother said, "That's how God works." He takes the hand that is nearest and uses that."

And he uses your hand and my hand, your voice and my voice. That word of kindness to a neighbor, work companion, or a classmate who is hurting is a word that comes from God. That spending the evening with a friend who lost a parent or grandparent is putting another before ourselves, just as Jesus put each of us before Himself.

As we prepare to celebrate the Eucharistic Prayer, the sacrifice of Jesus' love on the cross, the total gift of Himself to the Father, His expression of how far He will go to love us, we pray that we might have the courage to love God with our whole hearts, our whole minds and our whole soul.

And then love our neighbors as ourselves, reflections of God's presence in the world.