

30th Ordinary Time - A Cycle

October 23, 2011

When a woman teacher became engaged, one of her more experienced co-workers decided to give her some good advice. "Just remember, she said, the first ten years of marriage are the hardest." The younger teacher asked her co-worker how long she had been married. "Ten years," she answered. (from Reader's Digest, Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg. 161)

Our first reading and gospel present us with a very challenging topic: love. When we hear that word, we automatically think of romance, joy, and warm feelings. Sometimes it is; sometimes it's a matter of dedication, loyalty and commitment. Those who have matured in learning about love know that sometimes it's easy and sometimes it's hard work.

The Jewish leaders considered there were 613 precepts or commands in their law, the part of the Bible we call the "Old Testament." Jewish rabbis often debated which of these was the most important. So Jesus was asked what is the greatest. He states two, not one, as basic and central to everything else. The first is from the Book of Deuteronomy. It is part of a Scripture text that pious Jews recited twice a day. The second is from the Book of Leviticus. Putting these two together is original with Jesus and stresses Jesus' emphasis that true religion is more than a matter of external observance (which it is of course) but comes from the disposition of our hearts. Now, this topic about the interior dispositions of our hearts deserves a whole homily by itself, but it will have to wait for another time.

Right now I want to stress the importance of the external observance of God's law, that is, doing what God wants us to, even if we don't feel like it, even if our heart is not in it. I think many people in today's world think that love of God is just a matter of warm fuzzy thoughts and feelings about God, without much attention to our behavior as to whether we are doing what God wants us to do. For example, taking seriously the Commandment of keeping holy the Lord's day, taking any time for worship or serious prayer, many consider unnecessary. Jesus said in John's gospel: "if you love me you will keep my commandments." (Jn. 14,15)

Notice which of these two commandments of love of God and neighbor Jesus said is the first and the greatest. But the second is like it and we can't really love God whom we do not see if we do not love our neighbor whom we do see (I John, 4,20). There are almost an infinite number of ways we can love others: from common ordinary decency and friendliness to really putting ourselves out for those who are the most destitute as St. Francis or Mother Teresa did. This week, however, I would like to make a special reference to a man who had a great love for the people of Cincinnati: Carl Lindner. I have to mention him because he was such a special help to me while I was taking care of St. Joseph Church a few years ago. When I was assigned to pastor St. Joseph's Church temporarily (for three years), I discovered that Mr. Lindner had made a generous donation the previous year to St. Joe's at Christmas time. I got the idea that maybe with a special request, he would do more. How does a person get to see such an important figure as Carl Lindner? I didn't know how to reach him, but a good friend told me to go

downtown to his office and ask to see him. So I stirred up the courage to do that. I went to his office building and asked the receptionist if I could talk with him. I was sent to a waiting room, offered something to drink, and waited about 15-20 minutes and Carl Lindner came walking in with a couple of his staff members. He met with me for a little while, showed much interest in what I was doing and asked questions about St. Joe's Church and about its school. He offered to help me out and, subsequently, sent a donation 10 times what he had given in the past - which was considerable. Of course, I went back to thank him after we received it and every year after that he helped St. Joe and kept us out of the red. I felt this should be mentioned, because I'm sure he did lots of charity like that, things no one ever heard about. It was indeed a privilege to have known him. He was a Baptist, as most of you probably know, but he told me his mother was Catholic. I think that was why he was generous to Catholic organizations. One time when I went to thank him for his help, he said to me, "you know I help many people around the city and so few bother to say 'thanks.'" I was surprised to hear that, but I shouldn't have been surprised. It corresponds with the gospel story about Jesus healing the ten lepers, and only one returning to say "thanks."

That is why we are here today - to say "thanks" to God for all his goodness to us. The word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving." We thank God for people like Carl Lindner as well as for people who have far fewer resources than he did but whose hearts are also generous and giving. I know many like that here at St. Boniface. Giving God thanks is an important part of our love for God. St. Paul tells us as much in Colossians: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

(Colossians 3,17)

31st Ordinary Time - A Cycle

October 30, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Malachi 1, 14b-2,2b. 8-10; Matthew 23, 1-12) Our first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Malachi. In most bibles this is the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi was a fire and brimstone prophet who lived about 450 or 500 years before Christ. We don't know his real name because the word "Malachi" means "my messenger." In today's passage the prophet is mostly condemning the sins of the priests. The last verse of our reading is addressed to the people. What are those sins? Further on in his message, Malachi gives detailed descriptions of their sins, such as offering sacrifices unworthy of God. When a person brought an animal to the Temple, such as a lamb or an ox, to have the priest offer it in sacrifice, often the animal was blind, lame and sick. It was the law that only a perfect offering be offered, so the priest probably had to be given a bribe to offer such an imperfect sacrifice. Malachi said offer that sick or blind animal as a gift to your governor and see if he would be pleased. Other than condemning their unworthy worship of God, Malachi condemned the priests for not teaching the people what was right. One such thing the priests were telling the people was "Every evildoer is good in the sight of the Lord, and God is pleased with him." (Mal. 2,17) It

sounds very much like new age theology doesn't it? In the last verse of today's reading, Malachi turns his focus to the people and chastises them for breaking God's covenant through sins of adultery, dishonesty and injustice. The reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus, God's prophet, condemns the Jewish leaders of his day.

HOMILY: An employee at a local company suffered from an immense superiority complex. She usually had low-level jobs and one day found herself moved up to a little higher position with a cubicle of her own. That really inflated her ego. While she was still getting settled, she saw a man approaching her work area. Immediately she picked up the phone and pretended to be on an important phone call. "Yes, J.D." she said, loud enough to be heard by anyone 50 feet away, (J.D. were the initials of the president of the company) "thank you for your kind wishes and I will take care of what you asked me to do right away." Then she hung up the phone, turned in her swivel chair with an air of importance and said to the man standing at her door: "May I help you?" "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said. "I'm here to hook up your phone." Jesus tells us, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

(adapted from Preaching Resources 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time.)

We just heard strong condemnations from the prophet called Malachi of the priests of his day and Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees of his time. The condemnations were well justified for these groups of religious leaders thought they were so great, while they were full of pride and lacking in true holiness. In the history of all religions, it has always caused great damage to people's faith and to the Church when its leaders failed to live virtuous lives. Yet we are all human and, along with the entire gathering of Christ's followers, we confess that we are sinners as we ask God's mercy each time we begin the Mass.

But today's Scripture readings apply not only to religious leaders. Every person has a circle of people around them whom they influence for better or for worse. Certainly with people at work, in our neighborhoods, in our families, we can be a good influence or a bad influence. We used to call it setting a good example or being a bad example. Even though we do not hear these terms very often any more, they are still realities. Even children in a family or in school can be a good influence or bad influence on each other.

The kinds of things we say, the encouragement we give to do right or wrong, can make us true leaders for good or for no good. But do we go around like an Old Testament prophet pointing out people's faults when we see them doing wrong? It's a delicate thing. Some people can do it effectively, some people just alienate the people they are trying to help. Recently, I heard a good answer to the question St. Francis gave a person when the person told Francis that he often sees people doing wrong. He asked Francis, "should I tap people on the shoulder and tell them that they should be acting differently?" Francis said, "Do you live a good life, love your family, worship God, help others, then you are preaching to others how a person should live."

My most sincere prayer every day is "Lord, help me be useful to you." Some day, when I stand before the Lord, I know he will not find me perfect, but I hope he will say to me: "you were a big help to me in bringing the message of my love to others." Amen.