

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time – B Cycle October 4, 2015

(Genesis 2,18-24; Hebrews 2,9-11; Mark 10,2-12) I can't remember whether I told this before, but after God had created Adam and Eve, and they had been in the Garden of Eden for some time, Adam asked God: "God, why did you make Eve so beautiful, so attractive and so desirable?" God answered: "So **you** would love **her**, Adam." Then Adam said: "But why did you make her (you know) so dumb?" And God answered: "So **she** would love **you**, Adam."

In the story of creation in chapter 1, we are told that with every day of creation, God looked upon what he had made and saw that it was good. When we come to the second chapter, God sees something that was lacking in his creation. He sees Adam surrounded with all these good things he created, but he has no one to share them. So he says: "it is not good for the man to be alone." And so God created Eve from the side of Adam to be a helpmate, one by whom the man would find support and strength and love. The vocabulary the author uses in this passage implies a covenant relationship between the two of them when he writes: "that is why a man 'leaves' his father and mother and 'clings' to his **wife**, and the two of them become one body." This is the scripture passage Jesus refers to when answering the question that his opponents propose to him in today's gospel.

What a question it is. It is a question that we struggle with in the twenty-first century as much as people struggled with in Jesus' time. The question was: "is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" Let me say first of all, it was not a sincere question, because the Pharisees already assumed they knew the answer. So when Jesus asked: "What did Moses command you," they basically said the answer is "it is lawful because Moses permitted divorce." Jesus' answer was totally unexpected when he said "no, it is not lawful" because it was not God's intention from the beginning. God's intention was that a husband and wife were to be one and a divorce was like cutting a person in two. It's worth noting how Jesus phrased his question: "What did Moses command *you*?" Not, "what did Moses command *us*?" Jesus is implying that Moses was giving an answer that would accommodate their hard-heartedness.

For all Jewish teachers, divorce was lawful and each of them had an opinion as to what would justify a divorce – everything from major infidelity to the husband finding a more appealing partner. Jesus threw out all these opinions with his answer - thus alienating himself from Jewish practice and tradition and probably setting almost all of the Jewish teachers against him. There was one other aspect of this question that created a danger for Jesus, which could be why the Pharisees asked him about it. Remember the story of Herod Antipas marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. They both had to get divorced in order to marry each other. John the Baptist condemned their marriage and Herod arrested John and eventually beheaded him. In Jesus' answer about divorce, he is condemning Herod's marriage to Herodias.

You will notice that the real question here is not about divorce, but about divorce and remarriage. Jesus refers to it as adultery. The issue is not just about a man divorcing his wife, which was the only way divorce could happen among the Jews, but in Mark's gospel, Jesus also condemned the Roman custom, which was that a wife could divorce her husband if she chose.

Jesus reminded us of the big picture of what God intended marriage should be. But what happens when that ideal is not always achieved. We know Jesus understood that. So did St. Paul and the early Church. So does the Church today. There are marriages that should never have taken place. There are marriages that for one reason or another do not measure up to the

standards of the Church, such as when people are too immature to make a lasting commitment or they are getting married with the wrong intentions. There is not time to go into all the grounds why a marriage is not valid in the eyes of the Church. When that happens, one of the parties can appeal for an annulment. An annulment is not a divorce. A divorce says the marriage no longer exists because one or both parties want to get out. An annulment is an official declaration by those trained in Church law that says the marriage was not valid from the beginning. The Church does not grant divorces. It does grant annulments.

Our Holy Father, just a few weeks ago, issued some new procedures on dealing with annulments. Sometimes it took months or maybe even a year or more to get an annulment. The pope is trying to speed up the process. Some people might still have to wait a long time, but in other cases, there is the possibility of expediting the process. There is no indication that Pope Francis now or in the future plans on making any doctrinal changes; i.e., changing any of the Church's teachings on marriage or divorce, but he is showing a lot more compassion and understanding than we've seen in past years. In addition to speeding up the annulment process, the pope wants to reduce or eliminate any fees as much as possible.

The Holy Father shocked a lot of people last year with his comment: "who am I to judge?" He is not changing the Church's teaching on homosexual relationships. What the pope said is: "if a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge." The Church does not condemn a person because they might be attracted to persons of the same sex. The Church (and the bible) do clearly condemn homosexual activity. Perhaps the Pope means there are too many variables to make a judgment; maybe the pope is saying I can't look into the person's heart and see where he or she is with God. Isn't this true of any act we do? Didn't Jesus say do not judge? A person's behavior can and often deserves to be judged, but only God can look into a person's heart. I do know this much, Francis wants us to know that God is merciful and to know that God's love is infinitely greater than our wickedness. As our Holy Father he doesn't want any of us to be alienated from the Church, our spiritual family, but that we all seek to live as faithful to God as we can and if we fail, we turn to him for mercy. Amen.

28th Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle October 11, 2015

Attitudes toward wealth were ambiguous in the ancient world as well as in Jewish literature. Deuteronomy and some of the Wisdom writings tell us those who obey God's commandments will be rewarded with prosperity. On the other hand, the prophets condemned those who were wealthy for they often took advantage of the poor and had lavish lifestyles without giving consideration to those who were needy. (Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus reflects this attitude.) Our first reading reminds us that there are more precious things in life than having big stashes of wealth. The author of the Book of Wisdom prayed for prudence and the spirit of Wisdom and stated all gold, in view of her (Wisdom), is a little sand, and before her, silver is to be accounted mire (swampy ground or mud). This is very similar to Plato's teaching in the Republic that true riches come with a good and prudent life rather than from the counterfeit treasures of gold.

Perhaps the apostles were thinking of the idea in Deuteronomy that those who obey God's commandments will be rewarded with prosperity. They were surprised to hear Jesus say, "how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." Then Jesus goes on to say that entering the kingdom is not easy for any of us: "Children, how hard it is to enter the

kingdom of God.” No one knows of any gate in Jerusalem called the “eye of the needle.” Jesus’ example of a camel getting through the eye of a needle was a graphic way of saying it’s not possible. It’s only possible with God’s grace: “For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.”

Jesus’ response after the rich young man left was in disappointed surprise. He saw that the rich man, whom Jesus saw with love, would prefer worldly wealth to the riches of the kingdom of God. Sometimes those who have some wealth, even a modest amount, feel they are being condemned when they hear today’s gospel. Let’s realize first of all, practically speaking, the early missionaries, such as St. Paul, would have had great difficulty in founding Churches in various cities and towns without the help of those who were wealthy. The early Churches had to gather somewhere to hear God’s word and to celebrate the Eucharist and that was usually at the home of someone of means whose place was large enough to accommodate everyone. Remember church buildings did not exist until the 4th century.

I want to remind you of two other places where Jesus expresses a negative view, or at least a cautious view, of wealth. Jesus said: “where your treasure is there will your heart be.” (Mt. 6,21). In that sense, any of us could be led astray by wealth, however much we may have or not have, if we lose our focus on God’s kingdom. The other place is where Jesus tells the story of the sower and the seed. Remember the seed that fell among the weeds and as it tried to grow it got choked out. Jesus compared this to those “who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word and it yields nothing.” (Mk.4,19) In that sense, even the poorest among us can be so absorbed by activities and distractions, TV and cell phones and magazines and music and sports and computers, etc., we make no time to pray or come to Church or live as Christ has taught us. That’s my homily on the gospel. God has blessed us in many ways. Let us not forget where it comes from.

I want to say a few things personally. The other day I was with a few people and the topic of birthday’s came up. I mentioned I was turning 75 on Sunday. One person commented “you’re doing pretty good for 75;” and she added with great surprise, “you still drive!” For a split second I worried that maybe I should turn in my car keys. Canon Law requires pastors to write a letter of resignation to the Archbishop when they turn 75. Of course I did, but I added that I would be willing to continue serving here if he wished. Part of the process the Archdiocese has when a pastor turns 75 is for Bishop Binzer to meet with the Parish Pastoral Council, which he did here last week. Next week the Priests’ Personnel Board meets and they will make a recommendation to the Archbishop. I feel very sure the Archbishop and the Personnel Board will decide that I stay here.

Other than not having as much energy as I used to, and other than my knees, I would feel in every other way as if I were 20 years younger. My knees keep reminding me though that I’m 75. Several people have asked me if I have Parkinson’s when they see my right hand shake. It doesn’t always bother me, but I do not have Parkinson’s. The doctor said it is just a benign tremor that people sometimes experience only with their right hand. When I go out to eat sometimes, it is embarrassing, and it makes it hard to write legibly, but I could have worse problems. In my early years as a priest I used to enjoy painting and thought I could do a lot more painting when I retired. That’s out of the question now (and maybe retirement will be too). I remind myself that Thomas Jefferson started the University of Virginia, secured its location, designed its buildings, planned its curriculum and became its first rector at the age of 76.

I like being here; I like doing what I'm doing most of the time (except when I have three weeks' worth of work that has to be completed in three days). St. Boniface has been good to me and I've tried to return the favor. I'm grateful for all the support I have always been given and the response of our parishioners whenever I've asked for your help. So I'll just say thank you and hope you will keep me in your prayers as I enter into what is laughingly referred to as the "Golden Years." Peace to every one of you.

29th Sunday Ordinary Time - B Cycle **October 18, 2015**

INTRODUCTION: *(Isaiah 53,10-11; Heb 4,14-16; Mk 10,35-45)*

Today our first reading is a portion of Isaiah's fourth Servant Song. Isaiah tells us God's servant was a mysterious person or persons whose faithfulness and suffering would bring redemption to many people. The four Servant Songs of Isaiah were written 500 years before Christ. This passage was chosen because it corresponds with Jesus' revelation in today's gospel to his apostles that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The entire fourth Servant Song is part of the Good Friday service every year.

HOMILY

Jesus and his disciples were fairly near Jerusalem and so Jesus thought he had to warn them about what would happen when they got there. Of course he would teach and heal and cast out demons. Of course he would celebrate the Passover while they were there. But this visit to Jerusalem would be like no other. He told them he "will be turned over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and turn him over to the Gentiles and they will mock him and spit on him and scourge him and kill him; and after three days he will arise." The disciples knew he had many enemies, so it's no wonder St. Mark tells us "they were astonished and those following him were afraid." (*Mk. 10,12*) We are astonished too, when we hear what comes next, which is the beginning of today's gospel.

James and John, members of Jesus' inner group (Peter, James and John) asked Jesus for a favor. They wanted the highest and most important position in Jesus kingdom, after Jesus himself. An interesting little detail here is that Matthew, in his gospel, tells us, the mother of James and John asked for this favor. Was Matthew trying to make James and John not look so crass, or did she also join in with her sons in making this request? Little did they know that when Jesus would enter into his kingdom, there would be two thieves, hanging on two crosses, one on his right and one on his left. Jesus told James and John, they didn't know what they were asking. Were they ready to suffer for having followed the Lord (that's what "drinking the cup or being baptized (i.e. dunked) in the water in which Jesus was to be baptized." They said they could, and Jesus promised them they would. But he could not offer them the status and position they were asking for.

Again, as we heard just one month ago, Jesus knew they had no idea of what he was talking about when he warned them of his suffering and death. Their thoughts were on an earthly kingdom where they would share fame and fortune, while the kingdom he was speaking about was with the Father in heaven and the road that led to God's heavenly kingdom involved a life of commitment and fidelity to Christ, even perhaps having to lay down one's life for him. They had yet to learn that lesson.

So Jesus did not get angry – he answered gently: "you do not know what you are asking." Is this where we sometimes go wrong in our prayers, asking for something that we don't yet

understand will only get in the way of our serving our God. Maybe we're looking and praying for something that we think will lift us up above most other people, especially people who have tended to put us down, or maybe we're greedily looking for more material things, or hoping to see our enemies experience some bad effect for the way they've hurt us. Maybe we are envious of those we work with or study with and we wish we were as smart as they, or maybe we pray for greater peace in our own family, wishing to be like the Jones who are looking as us and who are wishing they had such a happy family life as our family seems to enjoy.

There's a lesson to be learned here. When we see in today's gospel the apostles following Jesus, dreaming of the glorious worldly status they soon will enjoy, begrudging some of their fellow apostles getting a few steps higher on the social ladder than they might achieve, at least they didn't walk away from Jesus. They had enough faith and trust to believe that he was the one they had to follow, even when he said "no" – not even to them but to their mothers who were pleading for them. That's the trouble, I think, with many people's spiritual lives today. They pray. They don't get what they want. They may pray again and even get their mother and maybe other friends and relatives involved in interceding for them and Jesus doesn't seem to hear their request. So they drift away – away from the one who loves them most and the one who calls them to true greatness as he tells us: whoever among you who wants to be great shall be your servant.

Sometimes we don't know what we're asking, but Jesus said "keep on asking, keep on knocking." And don't give up on Jesus for faithfully following him will allow him to keep teaching us.

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time - B Cycle **October 25, 2015**

INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading is a short excerpt from a major part of the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived during the time of the Babylonian exile, (roughly 600 years before Christ) and much of the time he was prophesizing doom and gloom. But in today's passage his message provides hope for the exiles, assuring them that God would bring them back to their own land. It is in this section of the Book of Jeremiah that God promises he would raise up King David for them and he would make a new covenant with his people. Today's passage has been chosen because of the mention that God would bring back to their land even the blind and the lame. The passage prepares us for today's gospel where Jesus, Son of David, gives sight to a blind man.

HOMILY: Two pirates, Morty and Sol, meet in a bar. Sol has a patch over one eye, a hook for a hand and a wooden peg leg. "Ye gads, matey," says Monty. What happened to ya?" Sol says, "Me ship was attacked, and a cannonball lopped off me leg. So now I got me a wooden peg." "And yer hand?" asks Marty. "When me ship sank, a shark bit me hand off. So now I got me a hook." OK, but what's with the eye patch?" "I got a piece of dirt in me eye, and now I'm blind in that eye." "But a person don't go blind from a tiny piece of dirt." "True," says Sol, "but it was me first day with the hook." (*Reader's Digest, Nov. 2015, pg. 74*)

There are many forms of blindness. It may be physical blindness when our eyes cannot see any more; but it could be blindness in our mind such as the inability to see someone else's point of view, someone's need, or someone's hurt. When someone who had been blind can suddenly see, it is wonderful. People who get cataract surgery experience that. One of the joys I had as a teacher was when one of my students grasped a point I was trying to make. Suddenly it was as

if they came out of the dark; they saw the light and their face lit up with that “ah-ha” experience. What I have to say today may not create an “ah-ha” experience; you might think “I’ve heard all of that before;” but even then, it’s worth being reminded of the points our gospel makes.

A couple of points are obvious: (1) perseverance in prayer, a theme that Jesus spoke of more than once. Bartimaeus would not give up calling out to Jesus for his help; even when everyone around him was trying their best to get him to keep quiet. (2) A second obvious point is that after meeting Jesus, Bartimaeus followed Jesus “on the way.” He didn’t just say thanks for the healing, Jesus, and go away. Sometimes we do that when we pray. After God gives us what we ask for, we move him to the bottom of our list of priorities until we need something else from him. Bartimaeus didn’t do that. He followed Jesus. Since Mark gives us the name “Bartimaeus,” (*most times recipients of miracles are not named*), I wonder if this is an indication that, in a short time, he became well-known among the disciples and was one of Jesus’ faithful followers.

I would like to say a little more about Jericho where this event took place. It is about 15 miles from Jerusalem and about 9 or 10 miles from the Dead Sea. Archeologists believe it is the oldest town on earth with a massive defense wall which goes back about nine thousand years before Christ. It is also the lowest city on earth, 850 feet below sea level. (Our death valley out west is about 280 feet below sea level). Since Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level, getting from Jericho to Jerusalem (a 15-mile climb), which the disciples were getting ready to do, would be quite a chore. Perhaps this climb could be symbolic of the ordeal Jesus was soon to face. Mark tells us Bartimaeus went along with Jesus as he followed him “on the way.”

A last detail I’m sure Mark wants us to note is that although Bartimaeus was blind, he had more insight into who Jesus was than Jesus’ disciples who had been with Jesus for three years. Bartimaeus called Jesus “Son of David.” In those days, that was a political term, indicating the Messiah, the descendant of King David who would be the savior of God’s people. Only Peter, up to this point in the gospel, was the only human person who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. It’s also worth noting that the cry of Bartimaeus is what we pray every time we begin Mass (“Jesus, have pity on me.” – In Greek it is: Ἰησοῦ, ἐλέησόν). “Christ, have mercy,” the Greek is Χριστέ, ἐλέησόν. Does it sound familiar?

In this miracle story, St. Mark is revealing Jesus to us and is encouraging us to choose Jesus as our leader and to follow his way – the way that leads to life.