

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2018

In the gospel today we find Jesus involved in a very frank discussion with his apostles. He minces no words and tells them that, “he must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” What on earth do you think made people so angry that they wanted to kill Jesus? You would think that someone who taught the golden rule, who taught to love one another, and do unto others what you would have them do to you. You would think that Jesus would have no enemies.

There is a lot of anger and hate and calls for retribution from every side these days. The Gospel fits well in our context. There have been terrible atrocities sometimes committed by the highest levels of leadership in the church. We are outraged. And there is an outcry for accountability.

It is in this context that we examine again what it is that made people so angry with Jesus that they wanted to kill him. Mercy and forgiveness is at the heart of Jesus teachings. He tells us not to forgive once or twice but 70×7 and to not only forgive but to love our enemies. So now we asked the question. When is enough enough? When is forgiveness irresponsible? We turn back to Jesus teaching and he answers this very clearly and says there is no limit to the times we are called to forgive.

When we are faced with abuse, betrayal, especially with the sexual abuse of children by, of all people, priests, people that you think you could trust, we are outraged and rightly so. But in the heat of our anger, more than ever we must remember the teaching of Jesus. But then they say, how convenient that we invoke this Gospel in the midst of such contradictions.

Nevertheless, it makes the gospel of forgiveness no less true, it makes it more urgent. For the victims of these atrocities it is especially urgent, that in the midst of the call of accountability, that the gospel of mercy must be invoked. It is the only way to heal.

Again we asked the question, when is forgiveness irresponsible? When does mercy become an enabler of abuse? Everybody has an excuse for divorce. All of us at one time or another have been betrayed and deeply hurt. But with some the hurt is so deep and profound that despair sets in. How can we ever begin to live, to truly live again? Again the answer from Jesus is that there is no limit for forgiveness. Forgiveness is essential to life, there can be no love without forgiveness. Forgiveness is fundamental to our well-being.

Does that go to say then that there be no accountability, that we be a doormat for the world? Surely not. Action must be taken. But this action must be done in the context of the gospel or it will fall on shallow ground.

The other day I was listening to a program on the radio about suicide. During the entire talkshow broadcast never once was the element of faith brought in. We are so angry and so discouraged and confused by the terrible problems that beset the church these days that we forget about the fundamentals of faith. The subject of faith is met with angry cynicism.

Why did they get so angry at Jesus that they wanted to kill him? Well, there you have it. The teaching of Jesus is too much for us to take.

Forgiveness is a fundamental. But there is such a reaction of cynicism about faith, belief, religion, or any moral authority. In our anger and frustration we forget the fundamentals. It would seem logical that in the discussion of suicide there would be some discussion of faith. What we believe is what drives us. Our faith, what we believe in, is directly connected to our meaning or lack in meaning in life.

Lord, to whom shall we go? I love the Catholic Church. Of course I have my life investment with the church. Of course I would say that. But the more I reflect, and study, and pray on this the more I am convinced that this is the place to be. I love being a priest and I love the people in the parishes of Sacred Heart and St. Alexander. Where else would I want to go? I read the lives of the Saints and eloquent scholarship in the church. I relish the direct physical connection to Jesus, throughout the centuries, with the apostolic succession in the church. There is a tangible unbroken connection between Jesus and our Pope.

There are terrible mistakes and contradictions throughout the history of the Church but that does not make the fundamental teaching of the church any less true. My hope is that the terrible pain and suffering that goes on in the lives of the victims of sexual abuse by priests will be healed or at least ameliorated by the message of mercy given to us by Jesus.

It is the most powerful thing that can be done. Some would say to us priests, how dare you say this, but I dare to say again and again: Lord make me an instrument of your peace.