

4th Sunday, Year A; Red Mass; Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston; Cathedral of St. Joseph

I. Introduction

A. It would be an understatement to say that we live in tumultuous times. To state the obvious, our nation is divided. Politics is always a rough sport but it is hard to remember a time when political rhetoric was so raw and personal. We live in a society where the humanity of the unborn and vulnerable is denied; where many people face chronic unemployment and poverty; where violence erupts so readily in our streets and in our homes. Around the world people live in the shadow of terrorism, and religious persecution is more intense and widespread than ever before. It is a time when many would prefer to close their hearts and our borders to refugees and to those seeking a better life for themselves and their families. To complete this gloomy picture let me add that, in an era of confusion and moral relativism, searching for truth, striving for virtue, and promoting civility are vastly undervalued.

B. Reflecting on this grim situation, we may find ourselves asking, “What can I do about all this?” “Is there anything I can do to make it better?” It’s a good question to ask and we can approach it from different angles. If you are an elected or appointed government official, you may be asking what you could do to secure better laws, policies, and programs of service. If you are an officer of the court and involved in the administration of justice you might ask how you can help make our society more just and peaceful, a place where human dignity and the common good are upheld. If you are, like me, an ordinary citizen, you may ask what you can do at home, at work, and among your friends to bring about renewed peace, tranquility, and reasoned dialogue.

C. We can also ask the question, “What can I do?” in one of two ways. We can ask it as persons who are ready to take on a challenge – as President Kennedy famously

urged in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!” But more often than not, we ask the question in another way – and it goes like this: “What can I do? After all, I’m just one person.”

II. The Remnant

A. If that’s how you feel, then this evening’s Scripture readings are meant for you. In the first reading we met Zephaniah who prophesied during a tumultuous time in the history of Israel. Corruption and idolatry had crept into Israel’s worship and the homeland was under threat of foreign domination . . . What was the Lord’s response to this situation? Zephaniah tells of God’s promise to deliver his people from these threats not by raising up a vast army but rather a small remnant, a handful of people neither powerful nor influential . . . but faithful and holy. This remnant would be God’s way of delivering his people and restoring them to a new and as yet undreamt of freedom.

B. In our second reading, St. Paul takes the notion of a remnant to a new level. Paul is writing to the Christian community of Corinth, a large and prosperous city, a crossroads for commerce, known both for its sophistication and its moral corruption. It must have been rough going for the little Christian community at Corinth. No doubt, this small group of Christians seemed out of place in Corinthian society. Its members were neither wise nor powerful, yet they dared to live differently. It was mostly made up of poor people but it also included prominent figures such as Erastus, the city treasurer, and Crispus, an official of the synagogue. Yet when it came to proclaiming their faith in Christ, all the Christians at Corinth were considered foolish, weak, and lowly. You can almost hear the colleagues of Erastus and Crispus saying, “Why on earth would you join a crazy religious movement like Christianity?” “Why threaten your security and your standing in the community?”

C. In spite of the low standing of the Christians at Corinth this little group of people remains influential some twenty centuries later. People still eagerly read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians to find out what it was like on the inside of an early Christian community. And while that community had its flaws and failings (as do we), nonetheless they blazed a trail of faith and they persevered in spite of external threats and internal divisions. . . . A handful of people, neither wise nor influential,

yet here we are in 2017, thinking about them and thinking about what they have to say to us in our personal and professional lives.

III. Our Situation

A. In fact, their example brings us back to the question, “What can I do?” “What can I do as just one member of a Church that seems to be losing its influence amid the moral confusion and incivility of our culture?” “How can I build bridges in a society where I face stiff headwinds just for practicing my faith or when being a serious Catholic makes others think that I am less than a serious professional person?” “How can I change people’s minds and open their hearts when the Church’s teaching on things so fundamental as life and family are rejected?” Yes, you are on the front lines and I know you sometimes experience what Pope Francis calls, “polite persecution” for being a serious Catholic.

B. The natural temptation is to draw back, to downplay our faith, even to lay it aside. Yet, this only complicates the question of what you and I can and must do to influence our society for the better. For what really transforms a culture from within is not political power or prominence but rather the witness of a holy life on the part of a remnant, a handful of people, who, in the power of God’s grace, make up their mind not merely to lead decent lives but indeed to model their lives on Christ and to live as the Lord himself lived.

C. That is why you and I should truly take tonight’s Gospel, the Beatitudes, to heart. For, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us how to be truly influential. He tells us to be poor in spirit – that is – to rely entirely on God; to mourn evil so as to resist it; to be meek and lowly even in the face of provocation; to seek a right relationship with God and others even as we long for God’s friendship; to strive to bring harmony with God and one another in our Church and society; to be merciful towards others, even as God is merciful with us; to be clean of heart, seeking God’s will and the good of others without mixed motives; and to be ready even to suffer persecution for the Kingdom of Heaven.

D. It doesn’t make sense, does it? How can we live like that and hope to have influence in our noisy secular world? Perhaps what the Lord is trying to tell you and

me this evening is this: We won't influence the world by shouting louder than everyone else. We won't change minds and hearts by being pushier than everyone else. But we may influence the world by taking to heart and living the Gospel with its reversal of worldly values and standards. We may influence the world if we continuously allow the Lord to influence our hearts to transform the way we think and speak and act. We may make a difference by accepting from the Lord and radiating in our lives the peace and joy the world cannot give. Dear friends, we will influence the world to the extent that we become like Lord and allow him to work in us and through us. For, at the end of the day, saints are more influential than sinners.

IV. Conclusion

A. I take this moment to thank those of you who devote your professional lives to both bar and bench. Thank you for your service to your local communities, your State, and our Nation and for bearing witness to your faith in the very challenging venues of your daily work. May the Holy Spirit inspire and guide you in your daily labors and may God bless us all in our witness to the truth and love of Christ so that we may help shape a society that is just, peaceful, and loving.

B. God bless you and keep you always in his love.