

7th Sunday A Ordinary Time - St. Paul

Introduction: Belonging

It is often said that we human beings are social animals. Some of course are more outgoing than others but almost no one wishes to be isolated. The truth is, almost everyone desires to have a sense of belonging.

And isn't it so that, we often identify ourselves as members of a group, most often beginning with our families. In Baltimore, I am told, people identify themselves by the high schools they attended and in some places by the parishes of which they are a part. When asked about ourselves we may also mention a prayer group, a committee, or a professional organization to which we belong. The point is that all of us need to belong.

Belonging to Christ

St. Paul refers that in today's second reading: he tells us that we belong not to one or another faction in the Church but rather that we belong to Christ and that Christ belongs to God. What does it mean to say that we "belong" to Christ?

Surely it does not mean that Christ's owns us the way we might own a watch or a car, for it is Christ who came to restore our squandered human dignity. Nor does belonging to Christ merely mean that we are part of as a loose association of like-minded people who happen to be enthusiastic about Christ. Rather, St. Paul often teaches that we are "in Christ" and that we are part of the Body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor. 2:27).

So, to say that we belong to Christ means he loves us and that his love has a claim on our hearts. Thanks to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit Christ and his redeeming love dwell in the very heart of the Church and dwell in the depth of our hearts. Through prayer, the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, we participate deeply in the mystery of Christ - Jesus Christ does not remain a distant figure of history but rather lives and reigns in our heart and in our church, such that we actually share in what he said and did to save us - his teaching, his miracles, above

all, his saving death and resurrection.

Thus, our whole life is shaped and molded by living contact with Christ and his saving grace through prayer and the sacraments. His love is not just a feeling but the power of his grace that shapes our way of life. As St. Ambrose of Milan once wrote: When we speak about wisdom, we are speaking of Christ. When we speak about virtue, we are speaking of Christ. When we speak about justice, we are speaking of Christ. When we speak about peace, we are speaking of Christ. When we speak about truth and life and redemption, we are speaking of Christ.” Indeed, to say I am a Christian is my deepest identity. this is what Pope Francis meant when he said we are to be full time not part time Christians.

Be Perfect As Your Heavenly Father Is Perfect

As our relationship with Christ grows and as our membership in His Body deepens, then the words of the Gospel begin to ring true in our hearts & in our daily lives. In a word, if we belong to Christ we must be Christ like. So in today’s Gospel, Jesus speaks to us of a love that is radically self-giving. He tells us not to demand “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” – words not often heard in our litigious society – Instead he asks us to offer no resistance to those who do us harm; he tells us to turn the other cheek. And if someone wants our tunic, we are to give him our cloak as well or as we might say, we are to give that person the shirt off our back.

In Church these words roll off the tongue but this teaching is much harder to observe in the rough and tumble of life – e.g., when a supervisor treats us unfairly or someone insults us. In fact, we probably won’t be able to live this way, unless, of course, we are in Christ, unless we share in the life of Jesus who offered no resistance to those who mocked and scourged him, who was stripped of his tunic, and weighted down with the Cross. “Father, forgive them,” he said, “They know not what they do . . .” (Luke 23:24).

Let us briefly consider what else Jesus is teaching us in today’s Gospel. He tells us to go the extra mile, not to turn our backs on those who want to borrow from us, to love not just our friends but also our enemies. I’ve spent the better part of this past week meditating on these teachings and I must tell you how often I come up short in daily life. When someone who is troubled seems to be taking too much of my time,

how easy for me to say, “I’ve done enough! I’m busy!” Or when I’m asked for “spare change” on the streets of Baltimore, how readily I imagine I’m being heroically generous when in fact everything I have was given me by the Lord. And in the rush of daily life, how easy it is to let relationships languish or to gravitate only toward those who seem to serve my purposes.

Yet if you and I belong to Christ, if we are participating in his life and his words have truly found a home in our hearts, collectively & individually, – then, however haltingly, we have to be on our way toward becoming like Christ, toward reproducing in our lives, his gift of self. Indeed, Jesus who daily knocks at the door of our hearts, who calls us by his Word & who pours out his sacrificial love for us in the Sacraments, this Jesus urges us to “be perfect, just as [our] heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).

As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “The perfection of God consists in the most ample love of people, good and bad. It consists in gentleness, patience, moderation, and temperance of the appetites, and what follows therefrom: the highest peace and tranquility of soul, so that no injury, wrath, or revenge can affect it; so that one is imperturbable and without passions.”

Conclusion

So on this Sunday let us ask the Father earnestly to pour out upon us the Holy Spirit so that we might become “one body, one spirit in Christ” – so that we might bear individual and collective witness to the love of Christ which makes heals our sins and fills us with grace and glory. How grateful we should be that we are Christ’s and Christ is God’s!

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!