

Ordinary C-4
2019

Context is important, we all say from time to time, when discussing issues and forming judgments. The context of today's gospel is key to understanding what we are hearing. In last Sunday's gospel story, we find Jesus back in his hometown where he entered the synagogue, was asked to read. He had opened the scroll, the Scriptures and with intent, he proclaimed these words from the Book of Isaiah the prophet:

“The Spirit of our God is upon me;
therefore the Most High has anointed me,
and sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives,
recovery of sight to the blind,
and release to prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from our God.”

And then he adds, in today's passage: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Some of his old friends and neighbors marveled at the power of his discourse. Others wondered, “How come he has this power and I don't? He's only a carpenter's son.”

Jesus, commenting on prophets never being welcomed in their native place, raises two examples of God blessing and healing common folk – a widow and a leper – representing two groups that would have caused consternation or revulsion in the minds and beliefs of his audience – and both of whom were clearly *outsiders*. Jesus announces that he has come for all who will open themselves to his message. And he seems to pose a question to his home town: “Is there enough love in this place to welcome the stranger, the “other”, those who belong someplace else?” This was a bitter message to hear, and it transformed the congregation into an angry mob intent on killing Jesus, providing a glimpse into what Jesus would later endure, but somehow he escapes the fury of the crowd, for now.

God calls us to a new way of living. It's not a once and for all event. All through our adult lives we uncover new ways of living, as God desires for us and for the world. Love – human love, friendship love, family love, intimate love, committed love, erotic love—all flow from a common source, the unending and boundless love Who is the Divine.

We cannot humanly love everyone; the person who can is rare indeed. Really, there are some people I just don't love – or like. Sometimes we feel like our culture is overcome by rageful anger; and honestly, there are plenty of social outlets to vent rage. I'm not referring to the righteous anger we feel in the face of human suffering and injustice. It's more the narcissistic, resentful, fearful rage like you may have seen in the news this week: road rage, as one man clings to the hood of another's car, speeding down the turnpike – all because of a fender bender.

We hear there is another response to all this dissatisfaction and anger: a love that chooses not to respond in kind to anger and hate, but to offer an alternative that is not rude or snobbish, unwilling to brood over injuries, is patient, kind, forbearing, and enduring. This is *prophetic* love, since it is rooted in divine love which is the greatest of gifts and never fails. This love which claims a divine embrace much greater than our assumptions, does not necessarily win us friends. There are those who cannot tolerate this kind of God nor this expansive, inclusive divine love. Jeremiah was told of the great honor that was his as a prophet of God and finds that the very people who one would think would welcome his ministry, are the ones who oppose and persecute him. But, God will deliver him.

Love is prophetic when it calls us and gives expression to higher truths, to gospel values, to what is noble and good about being human. Last summer I was in my hometown in upstate New York when I had a brief and uplifting encounter with a homeless man. He was a homeless veteran and was asking for a couple of dollars. I paused and spent a few minutes in conversation with him. He related that he had served in the Navy, for four years, stationed stateside. I simply thanked him for his service to our nation, and he looked straight into my eyes and said to me, "God bless you." It was not said in a perfunctory way, but with conviction and genuineness.

I came away with a blessing, perhaps one of the most thoughtful and most compelling I have ever received. Many times in my long religious formation I was instructed to see Christ in the "other" and I would argue with myself, "No! Christ wants me to look at the other and see the human face before me, not his." But in this short encounter I felt I was truly gazing into the face of Christ, seeing not merely the needy, suffering Christ, but the humble, servant Christ. I am reminded that the forgotten of our society, such as homeless persons, long for what we long for: human connection, common ground, and being valued.

We cannot humanly love everyone. But we can do the loving thing, can act out of love and behalf of love. Our words and actions can be shaped by love. We can affirm and be grateful for love when it is before us. This is by far the greater gift, the way which surpasses all others.