14th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Missionary Discipleship”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, it is the 14th Sunday of Ordinary Time and we are given this wonderful Gospel reading from St. Matthew. Since we recently celebrated the 4th of July, the Gospel made me think of the Statue of Liberty. You remember, don’t you, what is written at the base of the Statue of Liberty? At the base of the Statue of Liberty there is an inscription, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” Compare these words with what Jesus says today, “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will give you rest.”

This past week I was with a delegation from the Archdiocese of Seattle in Orlando for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Convocation on Catholic Leadership. The purpose of this convocation was to answer Pope Francis’ challenge that he gave the world in his exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel. Central to Pope Francis’ hope articulated in the exhortation is that all the baptized take on the challenge to become what he calls missionary disciples. Missionary disciples are followers of Jesus who marked by the joy of the Gospel seek out those living on the peripheries of society and accompany them, welcoming them into the Body of Christ. Pope Francis feels that as Church we have become too comfortable and we need to get out of our comfort zone, reaching out to those in society who are most in need to receive the joy of the Gospel. I mention this because in our Gospel reading today Jesus sets the example of what missionary discipleship looks like when he says, “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart. And you will find rest for yourselves, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

To understand what Jesus is talking about, we have to spend a minute or so to remind ourselves what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of this yoke. A yoke is what a farmer would put on an ox to till the field. These yokes would sometimes have two openings in them for two oxen because it was easier to till the field with two oxen rather than one. This is exactly the kind of yoke Jesus is referring to because he invites us to take his yoke and learn from him and that we will find rest for ourselves. What Jesus is saying is: he is the other ox. As burdensome as life can be at times, Jesus wants to accompany us in our trials and take most of the weight away from us. It is like that footprints poem that used to be immortalized on refrigerators everywhere that reminds us that Jesus wants to carry us through the difficult times.
Pope Francis and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops want us to reinvest ourselves in our discipleship of Jesus, by growing in our relationship with Jesus through prayer and conversion. This is because missionary discipleship must begin with discipleship. However, just as we are called to welcome Jesus as the other ox into our lives making the burden easier and lighter, as missionary disciples we are all called as members of the Body of Christ to go out to the peripheries and become that other ox to others, especially those who are so desperately in need of our love and concern.

Who is the best exemplar of this in modern times? Obviously, the best exemplar we can point to in our era is our patroness Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa, as a member of the Body of Christ, went out of her comfort zone to become a mother to the motherless. Here in our parish, I can point to our St. Vincent de Paul ministers who go out of their comfort zone to lift the burdens of those living in our local area. They do so by actually meeting with people in their homes or someplace like McDonalds if the client doesn’t have a home. I mention St. Vincent de Paul because they are always looking for parishioners like you who might join them as missionary disciples in our area. Our Knight of Columbus minister to those on the peripheries as well. Our High School Youth went on a mission trip to LA to be missionary disciples to the poor in that city and I think there is plan to participate in the Archdiocesan Migrant Worker service learning trip later this summer. Our Eucharistic Ministers to the Homebound are missionary disciples as well, bringing Jesus to people who are homebound. We have parishioners who are actively involved with helping those experiencing homelessness in our area. As a parish we hosted Camp Unity last year. This got us out of our comfort zone in a good way. It was a very good experience, one we should do again. And we have been supporting over 70 orphans in Africa through our Africa Orphan Program which has been going on for about ten years now. The list of missionary discipleship activities we do here is long and wonderful; however, Pope Francis and the United States Bishops are encouraging us to do even more.

Every one of us by our Baptism is called to missionary discipleship. As Jesus lifts our burdens, we are called to reach out to the peripheries. We do not have to solve all the big problems in the world. All we need to do is be mindful of the little things that we can do. It is the little things, done with great love that matter, getting out of our comfort zone, becoming interested in the lives of the people around us who are struggling in our families, in our neighborhoods, the shut ins, the immigrant, the list goes on.

We just celebrated as a country our Independence Day. As I mentioned at the beginning, at the base of the Statue of Liberty there is an inscription, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me: I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” Compare these words with what Jesus says today, “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart. And you will find rest for yourselves for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

My friends, what are the burdens we carry that Jesus could help us with if we welcomed him more intentionally into our daily lives through prayer and conversion? Who are the people in our families, neighborhoods, work or community that we could reach out to and share the joy of the Gospel? If every Catholic answered these questions, we could change the world my friends, we could change the world, as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.