

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus and Earthquakes”

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My friends, there are some days we never forget. One of those days was on Ash Wednesday in 2001. I am sure a number of you who lived in our area at that time remember that day. It was the day of the Nisqually earthquake. I was in Bellingham at the time and I was driving in my car so I just thought my car needed new shocks. However, when I got to where I was going people were like, “Did you feel that? We had an earthquake!” However, an interesting thing happened though at church that day. We had record attendance of people attending Mass. People were flowing out the door. It is true that we get a lot of people anyway for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, but that year it was different.

You see, when the earth shakes beneath our feet, our priorities change in the blink of an eye. Everything that people thought was important to do when they woke up that day changed radically after that earthquake. All of a sudden, checking on the safety of a relative closer to the epicenter was an item that became more important than whatever else they had on their agenda that day. And, for a number of people, getting to church for Ash Wednesday that year clearly was also a priority. Going to the mall to buy new shoes, not so much.

I mention this because when Jesus preached, his words were meant to have the same kind of effect as an earthquake. Listen to what Jesus says today, “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Can you imagine how the people following him received Jesus’ words here? Imagine if you heard this after following Jesus for a while. These words would have shaken you like an earthquake. Who does he think he is? Does he think he is better than my family? There must have been a few people scratching their heads. This guy spoke about love of God and love of neighbor. He even told us to love our enemies. Now we have a commandment to hate those who are closest to us. What gives? What are we to make of this?

My take on it is, when we are sleep walking through life and need to be awakened, we sometimes need a proverbial earthquake, we need to be shaken. This is what Jesus is doing to us here with his words. The rhetorical device he is using is called hyperbole and it is meant to shake us into a new spiritual consciousness. Clearly there is nothing wrong with loving our mothers, fathers, spouses or children. Clearly there is nothing wrong about valuing our lives. However, Jesus is making the claim that without a relationship with God, with enough passage of time, all of these good things will ultimately be taken away from us.

You see, here is the rub about life. We are born, we live and eventually we die. While we live, if we are lucky, we develop beautiful and loving relationships with others along the way. Some of these relationships help define who we are and our priorities, like our relationships with family. We discover in life however that even the closest relationships we value are very fragile. Because we are mortal, eventually even our closest relationships cannot last forever by our own effort. What Jesus is telling his disciples is that only he has the power of salvation, so following him ought to be our first priority. When Jesus becomes our first priority, our relationships with ourselves and with family members will find their proper place.

I think the key to understanding what I mean by this is the last line of our Gospel reading today, Jesus says, "...anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." Let's talk about possessions. We live in a very affluent area of the world and sometimes all of the possessions we have can fill our closets, garage and even spare rooms. I am going through a phase right now at the rectory of trying to get rid of stuff that I have accumulated over the past twelve years. During the process of starting with just my bedroom, I came up with four large trash bags of clothes I am never going to wear again that I took to a thrift store and five large bags of garbage that I simply needed to throw away. During the process, I was asking myself, "Why do I still have all this stuff?" Again, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is employing hyperbole again, but he is making very a good point. When it comes to our possessions we really need to ask ourselves the question, "what do I own and what owns me?" Ask yourselves that question this week, what do I own and what owns me?

However, there is a deeper way of understanding what Jesus is talking about and it goes back to our relationships. Do you want a good strategy on how to ruin your relationships with family members and friends? Treat them like possessions! With enough time, they will hate you for it. When we put Jesus first in our relationships with family and friends, recognizing the people in our lives as children of God instead of like possessions, how much better would those relationships be? I think this is especially true when it is time to say goodbye when a loved one passes away or when our health begins to deteriorate and it becomes our time to say our goodbyes. Life itself is not a possession. Life is a gift from God that we are not entitled to. And when it is time for our loved ones to go back to God, even though we rightly grieve, we are much better off spiritually if we are able to entrust the souls of our loved ones to God rather than holding on as if they were a possession. Just as an aside, and I say this with respect and compassion, an example I run into sometimes are with well-meaning families who keep their loved one's remains in a vase at home on a shelf along with the rest of their possessions. If that is you, I totally get how hard it is to let go. It is in a spirit of love that I want to encourage you to make an appointment with me to schedule an interment for your loved one at a Catholic cemetery like Holyrood or a nearby cemetery. The committal service that the Church offers you will be spiritually beneficial because it is an act of entrusting our loved ones to God

rather than trying to hold on to them with the rest of your possessions. You will be happier for it. Trust me on this.

The fact is, putting God ahead of our relationships and our possessions isn't easy all the time. It is good to ask ourselves the question every so often, "What do I own and what owns me"? The greatest witness to this kind of spirituality of course are religious sisters, priests, brothers, and such who left everything in their lives to follow Jesus. This past week, we celebrated the feast day of Saint Mother Teresa, who left her home in Albania to become a Sister of Loreto in Ireland which led her to her ministry of charity in India. We have a beautiful banner celebrating Mother Teresa in our Narthex with a very wise quote that exemplifies the spirituality Jesus is challenging us to consider this week. The quote from Mother Teresa says, "By blood, I am Albanian. By citizenship, an Indian. By faith, I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the Heart of Jesus." If you understand what she is saying, then you understand the spirituality Jesus is calling us to in our Gospel reading this weekend.

My friends, brass tacks, anyone who has ever been prepped for surgery at a hospital knows that, at a certain point in that process, you realize that you don't even own the hospital gown you are wearing. Moments like that in life are like spiritual earthquakes that wake us up and remind us that, at the end of the day, the only thing on earth we really have is our faith. This is why our Gospel reading this weekend is such good medicine. It is good to be reminded that in all things we need to put Jesus first in our lives even when this also means we need to pick up our cross and follow him. When we put Jesus first, all of our possessions and relationships will find their proper place. Only Jesus has the words of everlasting life.