

Friday, Oct. 16, 2020

“So that we might exist for the praise of God ...”

Texts: Eph 1:11-14

Luke 12:1-7

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

In the section of Luke’s Gospel just before today’s reading, Jesus and his followers have made the turn toward Jerusalem and there is no doubt that the Lukan author wants to show the early Christian community and us that Jesus is about deepening the formation of those who want to follow him on this journey. Jesus and his followers have left rural Galilee and they are heading for the big city. They have to pass through Samaria, but they don’t have the pleasant experience that we heard yesterday from the Gospel of John – an intriguing meeting with the woman at the well who gives Jesus a drink of water to refresh him.

On the contrary, in Luke, Jesus and his followers are refused passage through Samaria because they are Jews heading to Jerusalem. James and John even want to get into a fight with the Samaritans, but Jesus reprimands them and says in so many words, “We will go another way.” But then in fact, just a bit further on this journey, Jesus praises the Samaritans for being even better than the scribes at keeping the Law. The Samaritan, he describes in a teaching parable, took exquisite care of the man robbed and beaten whereas the priest and the Levite passed him by.

Lessons on who knows and practices the Law are indeed the focus of today’s Lukan reading. Having just left a meal with the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus is surrounded by a large crowd who must have heard how the meal went. I might venture to call that meal an academic seminar or a hearing for a Supreme Court Justice because Jesus is put to the test by the Pharisees about all the rules he has just violated as he came into the house. He didn’t wash his feet, for example, or greet his host properly. There follows an intense discussion where we could say that Jesus “loses” it a bit with some pretty strong emotional indictments of his host and this group of Pharisees in terms of how they interpret the law. “Woe to you,” he says! (We must always recall, though, that not all Pharisees were strict “textualists constructionists” because they also knew well the prophets who preached the importance of mercy, tenderness and forgiveness.)

In today’s reading, the crowds are there, but Jesus turns his attention to his disciples. He intensifies his teaching in favor of wholeness, justice, inclusion, mercy and compassion by the use of strong metaphors: leaven as hypocrisy; hidden negative thoughts versus revealed loving thoughts; lining up with Gehenna forces rather than with the immeasurable love of God; small coins, little sparrows, the hairs of our head.

And here a little story to tell you. Like many of you, I have always cultivated special personal time with each of my nieces and nephews and in turn, with their children, to establish something unique with them. When my grandniece was about 4 or 5, I would ask her: “How many new grey hairs do you think I have since I saw you last?” She’d

look at my head and say, “20?” I’d say, “Oh no – 2,124!” She would look at me with awe and then run to her dad and tell him the big news and bring him back to see me. He of course covered for me. I did this every time I saw her, changing the number always, until she was about 7 or 8. And then I said to her: “Sami, I don’t think I can play my game with you anymore.” She smiled and said, “No, Aunt Mary Ellen, you sure can’t! I’m on to you.”

Over her years, Sami made her journey from the literal to the metaphorical grasp of truth. She got it and she moved on to the insight in the metaphor. No one can count the hairs on our heads, except God! And the little sparrows? Indeed, they are not like the huge swooping falcons I see every day out my window. But these sparrows, they too are precious to God, for we are all connected, as our ever-generating, healing and transforming God and science tell us, and as Francis, the Bishop of Rome, is telling us these days in his recent challenging encyclicals.

So, what about our times today? Where is the hypocrisy? Where is denial? Where is ranking one person over another, based on color or sexual orientation or religion or ethnic origin? Where is the commitment to COVID-19 recovery? Where is the wider interpretation of laws from the point of view of the proclamation of the Incarnate Word of God? Where do we get our grounding in all of this? Where are we moving from the *literal* to the *metaphorical* to *insight* and to *action* in all of this?

I suggest that we contemplate again the text from Ephesians that we heard proclaimed this morning. But start from the beginning of the chapter – Eph 1:1 – and take in the Word deeply. The text proclaims that from love, God chose us to be in God fully through Jesus Christ and in the sealing of the Holy Spirit. As a footnote to this text in my Bible puts it: We “are a newly created people in Christ, fashioned by God for a new life of goodness.” (NAB, 1976) Let’s be ***at it*** all the more today, for God knows that our times need ***plenty of goodness to abound among all of us!***