

After Dallas and the Rest

Homily for the Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016

(Year C: Dt 30:10-14; Col 1:15-20; Lk 10:25-37)

The racially charged shootings and murders this past week – Dallas, Baton Rouge, Minnesota, Tennessee, Missouri, Georgia – ought to bring us up short when we hear this Gospel. Jesus says that “love of neighbor” means crossing boundaries of suspicion and even of hatred. I suspect we know this, but we may wonder how to put it into practice. I’d guess that not a few of us work, or go to school, or are friends with people of other races – and generally we get along pretty well. But there’s no doubt about the ample tensions that flared into violence this week. And race is just one hot spot: young and old, liberal and conservative (in politics and in church), rich and poor, more guns and fewer guns, and other divides seem to be growing and hardening around us.

Jesus knew the abstract principle – love your neighbor – was correct but by itself wouldn’t change hearts and lives because people wouldn’t know how to put the teaching into practice. So he told the story of the Good Samaritan. We need to do that same work today: take the principle right down to our everyday choices. Are there concrete things we can do to lessen the suspicion and even hatred around us? Yes; but it won’t be easy. And it will mean some self-examination, and probably changing some habits.

It seems to me that the core of what’s gone wrong around us and inside us is that good people like you and me have tolerated and even supported some profoundly unwise trends that have taken root and grown, and by now those trends have infected us (and I include myself). If we’re going to contribute to fixing things, we have to start with ourselves. What do I mean?

Let’s start with radio and tv and internet “news” and commentary. On all sides people make money, for themselves and for their sponsors, by ginning-up outrage, fear, and self-righteousness among their own “tribe” and by feeding suspicions about other “tribes.” You know that the media outlets you don’t like do this for the “other side.” Maybe it’s time to suspect that the outlets you like do it for your “side” too. And if that’s the case, maybe it’s time to stop watching or listening. We can create a bubble of comfortable but biased ideas all too easily today – and “love of neighbor” means learning to break out of the bubble to listen, genuinely, to ideas and to people we disagree with – and to try to learn what they might see and understand that we don’t.

I admit it’s not easy to listen carefully and seek to learn. No small part of the problem is that, in a sound-bite culture, slogans replace ideas; and we hear other people’s slogans and dismiss them, but we don’t notice our own. That’s why we need to listen to ourselves as much as listen to others: If, in a discussion of politics or race or economics you hear yourself repeating something you heard in the media – especially if I could fit

on a bumper-sticker – stop: ask yourself, have I tested this, thought about it, considered other people’s viewpoints? Does what I’m saying do justice to the complexity of whatever issue we’re talking about? Or am I parroting things that pass for thinking just so “my side” wins a point? Slogans make walls higher; they don’t lead to understanding and bridge-building. Love of neighbor notices and rejects slinging slogans, either in argument or in reinforcing the bubble when talking with those who agree with us.

Another thing: How often do you hear yourself saying, “I don’t understand enough about that topic to have an opinion?” That’s a marker of wisdom. If I’m honest, there are a precious few things I know a lot about, enough to trust my expertise: some areas of theology, ministry, a few areas of psychology, a bit of philosophy, and a couple of practical handyman skills. For most other areas of life, I know only enough to be dangerous, and would need to study and learn if I wanted to have an informed opinion. Opinions are toxic to love of neighbor; we’d be better without them, and if we admitted our vast ignorance.

Even when it comes to our own experience – something we’d assume we’re experts on, since we were there – it’s important to admit that we see our experiences through distorting filters (like colored glasses). I know from working with married couples in trouble that whenever there’s a disagreement there are always three sides: his, hers, and what actually happened. Life is like that. Only saints and sages can see themselves and others accurately. (Why did Jesus say, “First take the log out of your own eye, before you try to take the speck out of someone else’s”?) It’s a good sign when, after a fight, a couple can say to each other, “What do you think happened? How did you experience things? What am I getting wrong? How did I contribute?” – and genuinely listen to each other with the expectation that their own memory is in some ways one-sided and self-justifying, and so needs correction. It’s the same on a bigger scale in the culture.

I don’t think there are any easy or quick answers to the divides we’ve allowed to fester over the past years – about race, or politics, or money, or too many other things. And I encourage you to suspect, as I do, anyone who says that there’s a simple fix for any of it. The single best thing we can each do to put this Gospel into practice for healing in our society today is to look for wisdom: To root out lazy ways of avoiding thinking in ourselves; to learn to listen respectfully to people we disagree with, and to speak with respect of others with whom we disagree; to watch our language – not just for slurs, but for empty words and talking-points that don’t seek deeper understanding; and to acknowledge that, as Saint Paul says, in this life we see darkly, as in a distorting mirror. So we need the perspectives of people who see things differently from us.

It’s easy to feel powerless to affect so much that we see wrong. What I’m suggesting we do in the face of Baton Rouge and Orlando and Dallas and the rest may seem like not very much of a fix for the problems of violence and racial mistrust and so many

others. None of us here holds the levers of power to change those tensions directly. But that's not to say we can't do anything. We can improve the culture we and others live in, one little bit at a time. Blessed Mother Teresa didn't fix illness and poverty in the world or even in Calcutta; but she made the world a little better with each encounter, each held hand.

If we were in the Gospel story and asked Jesus the scribe's question, "And who is my neighbor," it's pretty clear that He'd say, "Your neighbor is that other person who's different from you and whom you suspect." Then He might add, "And what are you going to do to love them?"