

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jan 9th 2015

We stand here at the beginning of a new year, moving from the Christmas season to Ordinary Time. I admit that I love the Christmas season, perhaps because it seems so overlooked in a culture in which the "Christmas season" begins on Thanksgiving and ends on Christmas night. So I'm a little sad as we approach the culminating feast of the Baptism of the Lord this weekend. The slower time of the Christmas break is fading, and here at Creighton we are anticipating the rush of a new semester next week. We are moving into "ordinary time" in more ways than one.

Today's gospel reading from Luke picks up Jesus and his disciples on a seemingly "ordinary" day near the beginning of their public ministry. Jesus has just called the disciples from their ordinary work of fishermen to become "fishers of men." But Luke doesn't narrate any kind of apostolic master plan. If anything the agency in this narrative belongs to the man "full of leprosy." He is the one that demands Jesus's attention by falling prostrate and pleading for deliverance from his malady and its accompanying social ostracism. Whatever the weakness of his flesh, his faith is strong – desperate even. Jesus touches him and heals him, ordering him to fulfill the Mosaic Law but not to spread the word about the healing. And yet the word does spread. The sick crowds seek out Jesus. They are desperate. They are hungry. And they have few options. They remind us that "the victor over the world who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" often comes in the form of the mourning widow, the desperate leper, or the paralytic and his friends.

This narrative reminds me of a remarkable Catholic leader I met two years ago in Africa. In 1993 Maggy Barankitse had an ordinary life working at a diocesan center in Burundi. Then her life experienced a terrible interruption. In the midst of Burundi's brutal civil war, a government militia entered the diocesan center where Maggy worked and slaughtered 72 people. Maggy was left to mourn among the dead. Seeing the tremendous need around her, she began taking in dozens of war orphans, then hundreds, then thousands. She started a community called "Maison Shalom" (literally "House of Peace"), providing safe places where students could go to school, learn a trade, and form a new community that transcended the poisonous ethnic labels of the past. Maggy has described Maison Shalom as a sign of a "revolution of love" in the midst of social hatred, embodying a Eucharistic spirituality that "includes everything." She also has a Eucharistic Adoration chapel where she spends an hour a day in contemplative prayer. Like Jesus, she too has to "withdraw to pray" in order to have the sustenance to feed the desperate crowds around her.

Maggy is a remarkable woman with a remarkable story. What stayed with me, though, was her sense that she is an ordinary Christian who sees the world through the lens of God's extraordinary grace. In her words, "don't go out and imitate me. Rather, listen to where God is calling you in your own context." As we move into Ordinary Time, let us pray this week to allow God's extraordinary grace to interrupt our ordinary lives and transform our ordinary vision, enabling us to see the world anew.

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