

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jul 10th 2018

How the Ordinary Time Readings Are Organized and Can Help our Prayer

As a child growing up in my small, rural hometown on the Panhandle of Nebraska, I had to be creative for my entertainment. It was not uncommon that this involved an innovative rethinking of how I used the items I found around me – sometimes in improper ways! One such example was the day I paired a dog, my “Big Wheel” tricycle and some new socks...it was a warm, summer day and I was bored. (Boredom often led to mischief.) To make a long story short, I managed to tie the leash of my neighbor’s large dog to the handlebars of my tricycle, sit low in the seat and kick my sock-donned feet out to my sides. In a yelp and a flash, the dog was off to the races and so was I. The instantaneous dopamine dump of thrill was immediately replaced by a rush of bristling terror as my developing brain quickly began to appreciate the speed at which I and trike and hound were hurtling through space. Acting on impulse and fear, I dug my heels into the ground below me in an effort to apply some brakes to the situation. Over the distance of a city block I did manage to bring my experiment to an end only after shredding the heels of my new socks, peeling off a layer of my tricycle tires and forcing Arnold the dog to collapse in the shade—a panting, exhausted heap of fur.

In the readings we have today, we learn of individuals and communities who are misusing the “stuff” of life. They have lost sight of God as the original gift-giver and have become possessed. Jesus both models and calls for a proper use of the possessions, gifts and lives we have been given.

In the first reading the community is attempting to put things in the place of God. They elevate kings and princes, statues of precious metals, and even altars to divine status. The Lord responds by speaking through the prophet Hosea, “With their silver and gold they made idols for themselves, to their own destruction.” Rather than cast their attention on God, they have a perspective that is short-sighted and downcast on the material things of the world. Through the improper use of this materiality, they find themselves possessed by their possessions.

St. Ignatius of Loyola knew this “possessional” pull all too well. He was raised in a family that revered earthly success and status. It took an experience of loss, woundedness and his own perceived sense of failure coupled with newly engaged stories of the life of Christ and of the saints to lift Ignatius’ gaze from the glittery things of the world to the grace-filled presence of God. Having laid down his sword and courtly clothes at the foot of a Marian statue, Ignatius the pilgrim spent time in a cave mapping out a proper path toward union with God that he titled the “Spiritual Exercises.” One of the last pieces he crafted, which would become the beginning of the Exercises, was the “First Principle and Foundation.” At its core, this piece invites humans to use the things of the world that aid them in praising, reverencing and serving God and to abstain from those people or places or things that take them further from God. By doing this, he says, we save our souls.

The Psalm today offers a litany of body parts that are improperly used. Presumably, instead of speaking or listening or smelling for God, people are beholden to the gravitational grip of greed and grumbling. Like the mute man in the Gospel story, their possession limits them from using their mouths and ears and feet to praise, reverence and serve God. Jesus not only invites us to a proper ordering of the gifts we have been given (unlike my childhood experiment with dog, three wheels and momentum), but he calls us to join him in the work of building up the Kingdom of God—heaven on

earth. “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few.”

I will end this reflection in two ways (perhaps a choose-your-own-adventure, of sorts)...

Option #1...Consider this passage from Lumen Gentium no. 31 (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1964 as part of Vatican II) and as quoted in “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” (a statement provided by the USCCB in 2005 as a resource for guiding the development of lay ministry): “Lay people are found in each and every one of the world’s occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties.” How might we reverently live out the duties we find ourselves fulfilling in a proper way so as to be laborers with Christ?

Option #2...Pray with these words from St. Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” In the spirit of today’s Psalm and Gospel, how might we use the possessions of our bodies and gifts to properly praise, reverence and serve God?

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