

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Dec 3rd 2018

Memorial of Saint Francis Xavier, Priest

Last March I had the great privilege of going on a pilgrimage to Europe to walk in the footsteps of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Within hours of arriving in Rome, that place where Ignatius spent the majority of his life scaffolding the Society of Jesus, I found myself in the Church of the Gesu. Sitting silently in the middle of the body of the sanctuary I took in the twisting and turning bits of marble, the sweeping frescoes, and the soaring grandeur of it all. As I glanced to my left, on the far side of the church, I could see the bronzed burial sight of the saint's body. Then, looking in the exact opposite direction to my right I saw something rather different. I began walking toward this side chapel to get a closer look. "Is that...an arm?!" I exclaimed under my breath. Indeed, encased in glass are the forearm and hand bones, all still intact, of none other than St. Francis Xavier, S.J. whose life we celebrate in a special way today.

I would later learn that this piece of Xavier's body is here because it was the part that did all that baptizing (30,000 to 300,000 people depending on your source!) as he made his way, by faith, from Rome to Portugal, Africa, India, Japan and finally to the doorstep of China where he would die before setting foot on its mainland. He wrote to Ignatius from India in 1543: "As to the numbers who become Christians, you may understand them from this, it often happens to me to be hardly able to use my hands from the fatigue of baptizing: often in a single day I have baptized whole villages." What a way to use one's body to grow the wider body of believers!

As I reflect on the life of Francis Xavier and our readings today, I am struck by a powerful "golden thread" through it all: the beauty of finding God through diversity, not in spite of it. What a powerful and much needed message for our world at this current time when tribalism, partisanism and fear of "the other" wrack and wreck our world. Not unlike the servant at the center of today's Gospel story, our human family is "paralyzed, suffering dreadfully" because of our dislike and disdain for difference. Even our own Catholic, Jesuit University of Creighton that sets itself daily on living out our Christian charisms is not immune from dark-spirited messages and actions hurled toward community members merely because of their uniqueness.

Isaiah's vision in today's first reading is beautiful: that of the "mountain of the Lord's house." This is not a house whose entrance is meant to be guarded by sentinels, bull-headed bouncers who check "the guest list" at the door to determine one's entrance. Instead we hear "all nations shall stream toward it." All are welcome! Our Church continues to emphasize this vision. As *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions) reads from the Second Vatican Council, "In her [the Catholic Church's] task of fostering unity and love among humanity, and even among nations, she gives primary consideration in this document to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them." (n.1) Pope Francis goes on to say, "the Church will be ever more committed to travel along the path of dialogue and to intensify the already fruitful cooperation with all those who, belonging to different religious traditions, share her intention to build relations of friendship and share in the many initiatives to do with dialogue."

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140519_messaggio-50-dialogo-interreligioso.html)

The further into lands of "difference" that Francis Xavier traveled, the more he came to find God in all places and all people. While trying to unify the world under Christ, Xavier was discovering the depth

and extent of differences. He learned that God was revealed within those differences.

At first, differences were viewed as obstacles to his goal. Later, he discovered the variety and beauty of languages, faiths, cultures and living conditions. He began to feel and know God's work. He was transformed in his understanding of 'difference' and 'oneness'. While his work had a profound influence on others, he came to recognize that he was equally influenced through the interactions and contacts. As former Superior General Fr. Peter Hans-Kolvenbach, S.J. stated, 'When the heart is touch by direct contact, the mind may be challenged to change' (SCU, 2000)."

(<https://www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/xaviers-mission/who-is-francis-xavier>)

The Society of Jesus continues to carry this mantle passed on from Xavier to this day.

This is much more than just tolerance of religious difference (or any difference, for that matter). This is about celebrating the gift that the other is to our world, and can be to our life, if we are open to it. Our Campus Ministry Department took a group of seven undergraduate students who identify as Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran, Apache, and Sikh to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto, Canada three weeks ago. They reported that the experience was one of "warmth" where they felt "seen" and "fed" by authentic interactions with the more than 10,000 people from around the world who attended. This is what heaven on earth is like. We don't bemoan the fact that we must tolerate each other, but, as the Psalmist says today, we "rejoice" in the gift of being able to actually celebrate each other.

If we can do this well, perhaps the beautiful vision of Isaiah of beating "our swords into plowshares" and our "spears into pruning hooks" actually has a shot and we can use these new tools to reap the bountiful harvest of gifts that come from a human family that savors the beauty of "the other" and feast "at the banquet of the Kingdom of heaven." (MT 8:11)

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