

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: July 14, 2019



Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 30: 10-14

Colossians 1: 15-20

Luke 10:25-37

Mercy: Compassion in Action

Introduction

As many of you know I was away this past week to visit a good friend and seminary classmate, Bill, in Maine. I was able to walk along the sea coast each morning I was there. What a gift!

As I walked along the sea each morning I went past a beach area called "Mothers' Beach." This is a beach protected from the waves and bordered well by the rocky Maine coast so that it is ideal for families and their small children. Often as I walked I saw mothers with their small children in the early morning while the sea was calm. The mothers walked with their toddlers as they dug into the sand or explored the rocks or splashed in the water. I even saw some young mothers in their wet suits teaching their young ones in their small wet suits how to surf.

I was very much taken by the tenderness and patience that the mothers showed as they interacted with their small children. I thought of God and how God is like this with us: patient, caring, and guiding us in our lives.

Spirituality of Beauty

These thoughts connected with some insights I came upon by a very fine scholar, Sr. Mary Beth Ingham, CSJ, on the West Coast. Sr. Mary Beth looks at the experiences of beauty that we have in life, and she sees the journey of the spiritual life in terms of a "spirituality of beauty." She offers that the experiences we have of beauty: the order and harmony we experience, the

insight and luminosity we gain in these experiences, the delight and joy in these surprising moments of our lives is where God is deeply at work. God is alluring us through beauty into God's own heart. She also offers that she sees our Franciscan spirituality as a **way of beauty**.

Mary Beth offers that we can see the "pathway" of this spiritual journey as we move from recognizing **outer beauty**: for example, the forms that attract us, faces, eyes, the beauty of nature, and the musical melodies that touch our hearts ... and begin to recognize and appreciate **inner beauty**. In this step we begin to see, for example, the beauty of a person's character, their dignity, their moral integrity, and the virtues alive in them ... like honesty, generosity, fidelity, patience, and compassion. Seeing this inner beauty, we move on to **divine beauty, the beauty of God**. Here we begin to perceive and appreciate the source of all the beauty around us in who God is. We see God's goodness, truth, and love as the "wellspring" of the beauty all around us.

Hymn to Christ

This is a good link to our second reading today from Colossians. Our passage today is a hymn, a song, to Christ from the early Christian community. This hymn is acknowledging that all goodness, truth, and beauty comes from the heart of God.

It also brings out that all that we know of beauty, truth, and goodness comes to us through Christ in the heart of the Trinity. Our own beauty, truth, and goodness flows from Christ into us and into the cosmos. We have Christ's fullness of life within us, and Christ's fullness of life and love permeate all of creation. As St. Bonaventure offers, all of creation shows forth the fingerprints and footprints of God.

This hymn helps us see that this beauty comes to us especially through the pre-existent Word in the heart of the Trinity. We are made in the Word's image and likeness. The Word then takes flesh to remind us and call us to this original goodness and beauty that is alive in us through the graciousness of God. All of Jesus's life is about enfleshing and calling us to this original beauty in his heart. Jesus is all about healing us, opening us up, and challenging us to accept and live out our beauty. Jesus never punishes us. This is a false image of God that some of us grew up with, but it is not true. Jesus challenges us, but he never punishes us. Jesus is drawing us to this beauty deeply alive in us.

And then Jesus lays down his life for all of us to absorb our brokenness and sinfulness, even our violence as a human family, so that we might be free to be our deepest and truest selves. In his love we truly have the freedom to claim our beauty and live this out. This is what Jesus is about on the cross. He is pouring out his love so that we can see our belovedness, our beauty as ones loved completely by God. So we can see and believe in our being God's family together.

Now as the Risen Christ, he continues to attract us and allure us to this goodness in the heart of the Trinity and alive in our hearts and throughout all of creation.

In this hymn Christ is proclaimed as the “preeminent One.” This is not Jesus claiming that he is the Messiah, and he can then lord it over us. No, what Jesus is all about is having the fullness of the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of God within him; and he is always about attracting us to live in this beauty and trust its surety.

The Scholar’s Question and a Parable

This brings us to the Gospel story today. There are different ways into this Gospel, and it may be good to try a new way because it is so familiar to us. Let’s begin by looking at the scholar who is raising the question with Jesus.

Here is a person who has studied the Torah, the Jewish Law, and who knows it well. You might say he has a PhD in the Torah. He is wondering what Jesus has to say about the Law as someone who is not a scholar in the traditional sense. So he is testing Jesus, but he also has a serious question. He wants to know if there is “more” to the spiritual journey than what he knows presently.

And so Jesus engages with him authentically. Jesus asks him: What has he seen in the Law? What do you read there? And the scholar answers with a very insightful response. He offers that the heart of the Torah is to love God with all that we are, with all our strength, with our whole selves, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the heart of the Law.

And so Jesus says simply: ‘Yes, you have it. Do this, and you will live.’

But the scholar wants more and wants to justify himself in some way too. There is some sense that he might be angling for some kind of complement, like, yes, you are living well, dear scholar. You are a good example of what it means to love and follow God. So he asks another question: ‘And who is my neighbor?’

Jesus then tells the story, the parable of the man who is robbed and left for dead on the Jericho road. This is a very dangerous road. I have traveled along it. It is the road that leads down from Jerusalem to the town and oasis of Jericho. Jericho is a trading center, but between Jerusalem and Jericho there is a lot of desert. It is a place where bedhouins set up their tents. The bedhouins are known to be a people of hospitality. But there also can be robbers in these desert places who are ready to take advantage of someone traveling alone.

This Jewish man is set upon by robbers and beaten by them. He is left for dead. First a priest and then a Levite, persons considered holy and who know the Torah, approach and then pass by this wounded person on the road. Finally a “Samaritan,” an outcast in the eyes of Jewish society, comes by; and he is moved by “**compassion**” at the sight of this man on the road.

This is a very significant word in the Scriptures. It is used of Jesus at times also. It means the kind of feelings stirred deeply within us, in our “innards,” the kind of feelings that are stirred, for example, in a mom or a dad who see their child in pain. Compassion means “to suffer with.”

The Samaritan is deeply moved and attends to the man. He pours oil to moisten the wounds, and he pours wine to kill any bacteria. He bandages the man's wounds, and he places the victim on his donkey. The Samaritan takes him to an inn, and he stays with him through the night to make sure he is okay. He pays the innkeeper for whatever this man will need, and he pledges to come back and pay any further expenses. The Samaritan really does a lot for this wounded man that he does not even know.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., said about this passage: 'The priest and the Levite ask: "If I help this man, what will happen **to me**?" The Samaritan asks instead: "If I don't help this man, what will happen **to him**?" This is the contrast between the approaches of these three when confronted with this wounded person.

As Jesus ends the story, he asks the scholar: 'Who do you think was "**neighbor**" to this man?' And the scholar responds: 'The one who showed him **mercy**.' And Jesus replied: 'Go and do likewise.'

Compassion and Mercy

One of the key lessons in our Scriptures today is Christ's invitation to let his compassion and mercy flow through us for the good of others. True compassion can lead to action. Our taking action out of compassion is mercy.

Our God sees us as co-creators with Christ in the shaping of our human community and all of creation in the likeness of God's love and mercy. We are already doing this, most likely, without completely seeing it at times by how we are loving with our spouses, our families, our neighbors, and our community. When we forgive and give one another a second chance, we are enfleshing God's compassion and mercy. When we are moved by another's needs or their difficult situations and we respond, we are letting God's mercy flow through us.

At times we may feel "unworthy" of God's love or unworthy to be an instrument of God's mercy and peace, but this is not how God sees us. The "worthiness" question is not God's question. This is something we have fallen into because of our own human outlooks. God, like a good mother or a good father, never asks if their son or daughter is worthy of their love. These good parents just love, and so it is with God.

Our God, like the Good Samaritan, sees and feels our needs; and God responds wholeheartedly to us. May we "go and do likewise" to the best of our abilities.

Fr. Henry B. Beck, OFM / St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, PA.