

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C - 2007

- 1) One afternoon here in September of 2000,
 - a) I came downstairs to greet the kids,
 - b) Who were going home after their first day back at St. Gregory's school.
- 2) I found two girls probably sisters, one in about the fourth grade, one in sixth,
 - a) Staring up at the statue of the Pieta out in the vestibule,
- 3) Because I was brand new in the parish
 - a) I went up to introduce myself
- 4) But before I could open my mouth,
 - a) The younger girl turned towards me pointed towards the statue and asked,
 - i) "Who's that?"
- 5) I replied, "That's Jesus."
- 6) Then she pointed to the woman cradling Jesus in her arms.
 - a) "Who's that?"
 - b) "That's Mary, Jesus' mother." I said.
- 7) "MARY IS JESUS' MOTHER?" She said.
 - a) She paused and then asked
 - b) "What happened to him?"
 - c) "He's dead." I said.
- 8) "JESUS IS DEAD???" The little girl exclaimed,
 - a) Then, pointing to the nail hole in his hand, she said "And what is that?"
 - b) "That's a nail hole - that is how they killed him."
- 9) "SOMEBODY KILLED JESUS?!" She cried, "OH, NO!"
- 10) At that moment the older girl, clearly getting more and more embarrassed by her sister's ignorance, grabbed her and hustled her away.
- 11) Now, in all fairness that little girl was probably brand new to St. Gregory's school,
 - a) And like so many of the children who come to Catholic school these days,
 - i) Her religious formation probably had begun that very day.
 - b) Indeed, I might have been the first person
 - i) She could ever ask such basic questions of.
- 12) Nevertheless, when I told that story to a priest friend later that week, his reaction was not sympathy for the girl, but simply to say (now brace yourselves),
 - a) "Well, what do you expect from St. Gregory's?"
- 13) This statement did not surprise me, believe it or not,
 - a) Because I had heard ones like it before.
 - i) From the personnel director who did not want me to come to St. Gregory's, because I would be wasted here.
 - ii) From a teacher at the seminary who warned me of the radical feminists, social libertarians, and wild musicians that held sway here.
 - iii) From a former priest of this parish, (who will remain nameless) who said, "But you realize of course, that they are LIBERALS there . . . of course, don't get me wrong. I like liberals. Some of my best friends are liberals . . . I MYSELF would be a liberal . . . if it weren't for HELL!"
 - iv) Or from a lay person who simply said, "St. Gregory's? Aren't they going to close that place?"

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- 14) But statements like these *should* surprise us all;
- 15) For anyone who knows the history of this parish
- a) Whose 100th anniversary we celebrate today,
- 16) Knows that
- a) When the upper west side was a poor neighborhood,
 - i) Filled with decrepit tenements, and homeless beggars.
 - b) When it was dangerous neighborhood,
 - i) Filled with drug pushers in the streets and drug users in the doorways
 - c) When it was a changing neighborhood,
 - i) Filled with first the Irish and the Germans and then the Hispanics and then the Haitians, on and on in a melting pot that often reached the boiling point.
- 17) It was St. Gregory's that struggled to respond to the needs of the neighborhood,
- a) Through its pastors, Like Frs. Brown O'Donnell Lennon Rafferty and Darbouze
 - b) Through its ministries, such as the soup kitchen and of course its school,
 - c) But most importantly through its people
 - i) Who worked with the pastors,
 - ii) Volunteered in its ministries
 - iii) And filled its liturgies with lively music and fervent prayer
 - (1) That was not cut off from the world
 - (2) Nor averse to challenging the powers that be, be they civil or ecclesial.
- 18) This was the St. Gregory's that I came to that fall of 2000;
- a) Not a dead parish filled with the leftovers of dead ideologies just waiting to be put out of its misery,
 - b) But a living part of the body of Christ.
- 19) How could so many people get it so wrong?
- 20) Perhaps Moses can help us understand how.
- a) For after Moses had led his people out of Egypt,
 - i) At times clearly against their will and his better judgment;
 - b) After he had gone up on Mt. Sinai and left them alone,
 - i) And they promptly rebelled against him and rejected his God.
 - c) After he came down from Mt. Sinai with God's offer of a relationship in the 10 commandments,
 - i) And found the people of Israel already breaking all ten of them.
 - d) After all their disobedience sinfulness and just general crudeness,
 - i) It would have only been logical for Moses to accept God's offer, made in today's first reading, of a new start.
 - (1) "Let me destroy the people of Israel" God says to Moses, "And I will raise up from you a great nation."
 - e) Because that is what we do;
 - i) Whether it is with a relationship which is now a dead end
 - (1) Or with a friend who is having problems that never seem to end
 - ii) Whether it is with a church like St. Gregory's which has struggled over the years just to survive
 - (1) Or with whole nation like Israel which always seems to fail.

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- iii) We all know how to cut our losses
 - (1) Like God wanted Moses to do with Israel;
 - (2) Like so many wanted the diocese to do with St. Gregory's.
 - f) But what does Moses do?
 - g) He reminds God of God's own love of Israel
 - i) Which predates anything Israel could have done to accept or reject that love;
 - h) And asks, in essence
 - (1) If your love is so unconditional, God,
 - (a) Where did all the conditions suddenly come from?
 - ii) And in that way only Moses could,
 - (1) Moses changes God's mind, and Israel is spared.
 - i) For Moses' God, Jesus' God, our God
 - i) Is the man in Jesus' parable
 - (1) Who takes a chance on the lost sheep
 - (a) When the sure thing would have been to stick with the 99
 - ii) Is the woman
 - (1) Who takes a chance on finding the lost coin,
 - (a) When the sure thing would have been to stop wasting time looking and start working for more money.
 - iii) Is the God who takes a chance on Israel
 - (1) When the sure thing would have been Moses.
 - iv) This is the God who does not cut losses
 - (1) But is always willing to take the chance on us all.
- 21) When I was asked by Msgr. Crimmins to preach today, my first thought was that
- a) The 100th anniversary of St. Gregory's almost did not happen.
 - i) But it has and that was because a large group of people here were not willing to just let the diocese to cut its losses;
 - ii) But instead did what St. Gregory's is so famous (or infamous) for-
 - (1) They challenged the ecclesial authorities;
 - (i) Respectfully but firmly reminding them
 - 1. That all the judgments made about St. Gregory's over the years were really just prejudices
 - (ii) And that this place's civil activism and social responsibility; its lively music and diverse community
 - 1. Were not signs of a dying parish
 - 2. But signs of a living community,
 - 3. Struggling, to be sure, but struggling especially to respond to the needs of a neighborhood
 - (iii) Where there are still people who are poor,
 - 1. As well as those who are rich
 - (iv) Where there are still people who are homeless and hungry,
 - 1. As well as those who live in expensive condos and are well fed.
 - (v) Where there are still people who are excluded, judged and even hated;

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1. Living side by side with people whose liberal pieties would never allow them to admit to having such prejudices.
- (2) In the face of so many challenges; what was the diocese supposed to do?
What are we supposed do?
 - (a) What Moses would have God do
 - (b) What Jesus would have us do;
 - (i) Take a chance on the long shot;
- 22) Support St. Gregory's school,
 - a) So that it can continue to be a place where young girls can ask questions and be formed in the faith
 - i) Even when the sure thing would be to close the school and cut our losses
- 23) Support St. Gregory's social ministries such as its soup kitchen
 - a) So that it can continue to be a place where the hungry can get a meal
 - i) Even when the sure thing would be to let someone else worry about them.
 - b) Support St. Gregory's parish
 - i) So that it can continue to be that place on the Upper West Side
 - (1) Where people no matter who they are,
 - (2) Where they come from
 - (3) Language they speak or
 - (4) Lifestyle they lead
 - (5) Are welcomed and in that welcome
 - (a) Meet that God who never cuts losses,
 - (b) But always takes a chance on the long shot
 - (i) And offers us the possibility to do the same.