HOMILY FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – C

One of my favorite stories from my years in Marion came from a parishioner whose name was Jack. Jack’s mother had Alzheimer’s and was residing in a nursing home at the time. Like many who have moved into the more advanced stages of this disease, Jack’s mom had many vivid memories from the past but was no longer able to accurately process what was going on in the present. Many of you know how frustrating it can get trying to communicate with persons like Jack’s mom. But at times, things are said that can be absolutely hilarious. At other times, things are said that are profoundly true. And sometimes frustration, hilarity and truth all come together.

This is what happened one day when Jack visited his mother. He came into her room and greeted her. Her response was, “Who are you?” He answered, “It’s me, Jack.” A few moments later she asked again, “Who are you?” And again he answered, “I’m Jack, mom, don’t you remember me?” And a few moments later she asked yet again, “Who are you?” In frustration, he blurted out, “I’m your son Jack. Don’t you remember me?” At this she took a good look at him, got this quizzical look on her face and said, “What the heck happened to you?” Obviously, in her mind, Jack was still a strapping young man and nothing like the gray haired man with a paunch that was standing before her.

“What the heck happened to you?” I have to admit that often I find myself asking the same question when I look in the mirror these days. It’s definitely not the face that used to look back at me when I gazed in the mirror. And I have to say that I’m still surprised sometimes when I look into the mirror and see an old man looking back at me. But that’s what I get. And when I happen to catch a glimpse of myself in a full-length mirror, it gets even worse. I would be lying to you if I were to say that I don’t find this to be a bit distressing. In fact, it’s getting more distressing all the time.

And so I have begun to take great comfort in the words we heard in today’s reading from the Book of Revelation – “Behold, I make all things new.” These words give me hope that at some point out ahead of me there will be some kind of grand reversal to the steady decline I so often see in myself and others -- that there will come a time when we will be better than ever. This is the promise God makes to us through the scriptures -- that God is working to bring about a new creation where things will be better than they are now or ever have been – and not just for us, but for everyone who wants to share in it.

But this making all things new business isn’t something that God does without our participation in the process. This is so because part of what it means to be made new depends on what we do, rather than what God does for us. This is where the gospel comes in. There we heard Jesus say, “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus couldn’t have made it any clearer than he has in this section of John’s gospel that if we are to live in the new creation – in the glorified life that he has given us a glimpse of in his resurrection -- then we have to love as he loved, because that’s just part of the package of being made new.

So what does it mean to love as Jesus loves? Well, as we follow him through the gospels it becomes clear that Jesus’ way of loving certainly involves tending to the concrete needs of others. Again and again we find Jesus moved with compassion by someone’s physical, mental, or spiritual illness, and doing what he could to help them. We also find him responding to the concrete needs of people for food, forgiveness, and friendship. So if we are going to love as Jesus loves, it means that we will do the same.

But there is more to Jesus’ way of loving than tending to the concrete needs of people. This is true because often the concrete needs of people are the result of societal issues or what we might call systemic issues that have to do with injustice. So while it’s a lot easier just to take care of concrete needs, unless we do what we can to bring about the just treatment of people, tending to their concrete needs will provide...
only temporary fixes. Without doing something to address the root causes, the sick will get sick again, the hungry will be hungry again, those jailed will be jailed again, and those needing money for the next month’s rent or utilities will need it again and again and again. Jesus saw clearly that to make things new, more than works of mercy were required. For Jesus, loving others meant to work for justice.

As we move through the gospels, we find Jesus working to overcome prejudices and other social barriers that kept people from sitting at the same table and working together. He carried out his ministry in a way that promoted the status and dignity of women. He pushed for restorative justice, calling his people to move beyond a vengeful eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth mentality, to one that would actually help people who had gone bad move forward in a way that was good. He was constantly challenging the abuses of power among his own people, pointing out ways that their religious leaders were seeking to control the people, rather than to free them to be happy, creative, and productive. He stood up to those who were increasing their wealth by taking unfair advantage of the poor. For Jesus, loving meant caring enough to ruffle feathers and to work for justice.

Though it is definitely challenging to love as Jesus loved, I know that this is part of what it means to be made new. I know because I have begun to experience this being made new at times. As I get older it’s true that I feel an increasing number of aches and pains, along with a diminishing of strength and stamina. But I find that when I do the kinds of things that Jesus would do for the sake of others, when I love as he loves, there is a new energy that courses through me, and a joy that wells up within me. And while such effects are often only, it does give me a foretaste of things to come. And this helps me to live with the assurance that following the way of love is leading to something good. And I know that many of you have experienced this in your own lives.

When we love as Jesus loves, we find it possible to live with hope and joy. We find it possible to trust that God means it when he says, “Behold, I make all things new,” because we’ve begun to experience it already.

Fr. Rod Damico
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