

**Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(July 25, 2010)**

Surprise!

Jesus tells parables to teach lessons. But to gain the attention of his audience his parables usually contain some surprise that makes them sit up and take notice. When we hear the parables today we usually miss the surprise simply because our own culture does not look on things or think the same way people in Jesus time did. However we can understand the point of the parable anyway. But sometimes it helps to try to recover the surprise of the people who first heard the story.

So what is the surprise of the man who goes to his neighbor and asks for bread for his guests who have arrived unexpectedly? The surprise is that the sleeping friend at first refuses to get up in the middle of the night and honor his neighbor's request. The sense of hospitality in the Middle East during Jesus' time simply would not allow this. And according to Barbara Reid writing in *America* this week, the sleeping friend finally gets out of bed to help his neighbor not so much because of the neighbor's persistence but because of the shame he would incur if he refused to help someone in need. Indeed she says that shame would come not only upon him and his household but upon the whole village who all share responsibility for hospitality to the guest who has arrived unexpectedly. She maintains that the sayings that follow the parable reinforce its meaning, that God stands ready and eager to open the door to whoever knocks and to give whatever we ask, just as parents desire to give good things to their children.

The Gospel challenges the idea that God sends suffering to test or challenge or strengthen us and insists that God desires only good for us. We do not have to badger God or bargain with God to give us good things.

What most interests me today is the whole notion of solidarity that is present in the community. The whole village is somehow involved in what is going on and if the wrong decision is made the whole village will suffer and be shamed by it.

Something similar, I think, has been happening in our Church. For

some years now we have all been shamed by the scandals of sexual abuse, particularly that of children, but of adults as well, that has been perpetrated by priests and even members of the hierarchy. And just as shameful has been the inadequate or downright bad response of bishops and others in high positions in the Church. A recent statement from the Vatican saying that ordaining women would be just as sinful as molesting children seems particularly outrageous and has caused a lot of anger, pain, and bewilderment. To those of you who feel this way, let me simply say that I share your pain and bewilderment. I even feel your anger.

In the midst of all this I had the pleasant experience of a visit from a dear friend of mine recently, and we were talking about this very subject. He expressed his own disappointment with the Vatican response and even his anger at the inept way the problem has been handled. But you know, he went on to say, we really have to keep a sense of perspective. As bad as what we are experiencing right now may be, there have been comparable and even worse times in the past. After all the pope is not in exile in Avignon; there are not three men all claiming to be the pope. No pope in modern times has sired children or thrown drunken orgies in the Vatican as apparently happened during the time of the Borgias. Bad things have happened but we are still here. We will get through this with the help of God.

Of course I basically agree with my optimistic friend. But at the same time it's right now that we are suffering and it's hard to look beyond our present feelings to the lessons of history.

My own way of coping is to look at all the good that is happening in our Church today along with the bad. The Church has always had its saints as well as its sinners, and that is still true today. Just consider the good that the Church has done in the past and is still doing today: the help it gives to the poor, its hospitals and schools – although it's getting more and more difficult to do that with the financial crisis we are all facing. Think of what this parish of Holy Trinity accomplishes. Think of why you come here, and think of our outreach to the poor and the needy. Think of the sense of community that is present in our congregation.

Yes, it's true that we are like that whole village in Jesus' time that would feel shame if the sleeping friend did not respond to his neighbor. As

members of the Church we all feel shame at what has happened. But our faith tells us that the same God who sent his own Son to take on our flesh and blood and bones, to feel our pain and suffering, and finally to die our death painfully and shamefully, that same God loves us and is with us in spite of everything.

In the meantime we all have to pray for something that I recommended some years ago but it hasn't happened yet, and that is that the Vatican find itself a good Public Relations person.

I have to tell you about something I read recently. A pastor was being harassed by parishioners who were complaining about all the bad things that were happening in the Church. One after the other his parishioners said, "Why doesn't the Church do this or why do the bishops and pope say that?" Finally in desperation and fed up, he said, "Stop griping about the Church. It's just as well that the Church is not perfect. If it were *you* could not be a member!"