

6th Sunday – Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Deacon Ron Tocci

February 11, 2007

43 ½ years...That's how long Cathy & I have been married....If you ask her, she'd probably say it seems a lot longer...Now you would think that after 43 ½ yrs we'd have the communication thing down pretty well...that we would understand what one another is saying & thinking most of the time...Well, let me tell U...at least once a day, Cathy will say something to me & I'll find myself thinking or - if I feel brave – saying, "What the heck are you talking about?"...or, "What the heck are you thinking?"...Now, I admit, most of the time it's my fault because – even after 43½ yrs - I haven't figured out how her mind works & probably won't in 63 ½ yrs ...But every once in a while, I am totally justified in being mystified by something she's said...It just makes no sense...And I think it's kind of the same feeling we can get about today's Gospel...After hearing what Jesus said to that huge crowd of people, who can blame us for asking, "What is He talking about?..What the heck is He thinking?"

This passage from Luke's Gosp is part of Jesus's Sermon on the Plain, which is similar to His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel...Jesus comes down from the mountain to a level place & He begins by pronouncing blessings, just as he does in the Sermon on the Mount,...but he also pronounces **woes**. A woe is like a curse or a misery...Blessings are good. ...Woes are bad...And just look at who Jesus says is blessed and who is "woed."...Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who are weeping, & you who are hated & persecuted on my account." ...Now, what on earth is so blessed, so good about being poor?..Or about being hungry?...Or crying your eyes out?. ...Or being hated & rejected?...Then, Jesus goes on to say, "Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full, woe to you who are laughing, woe to you when all speak well of you."...Hey, come on!...Why is it a curse to be well off, to be well-fed, to be happy, to be admired & well-liked? ...Who wouldn't want these things?...What in the world is Jesus talking about...What is He thinking?

As much as I've struggled with these questions and consulted numerous Bible commentaries, I'm still not really sure of the answers....But here is where the Holy Spirit has led me and so I'll trust - & I hope you will too – that this is the message the Spirit wants me to preach and wants you to hear...

Most of the people Jesus was speaking to were His followers who, by & large, were on the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder. ...They were folks who knew their share of hard times & grief. ...they were folks without influence or power. They had no clout. And they were folks who would eventually suffer because of their faith...To these people, then, Jesus' words were words of encouragement & hope. Even if no one else was on their side, Jesus was...OK, we have no problem with that. ...But where does that leave us?...We're not poor & we don't want to be. And while we may not see ourselves as rich, most of the world does...As one person put it, "In much of the world, if you are able to decide what you'll have for dinner, have some method of transportation, & have a change of underwear, you are rich."...And were certainly not hungry...If anything, most of us have too much to eat,, Now tears & weeping, we know something about, don't we?...Being relatively well off doesn't protect us from pain & heartaches...but it does help us get thru them...As for being hated & persecuted for Jesus' sake,...well, people may not like our religion, but rarely, do we suffer for Jesus...So, at best, only 1 of the 4 blessings Jesus pronounced apply to most of us.

Now what about those 4 woes?...Let's admit it, they are things most of us desire & pursue...We want wealth, we want to eat well, we want to laugh & be happy, we want everyone to like us &

admire us...What's wrong with that?... Is Jesus trying to make us feel guilty for wanting these things? ...Is He saying He would rather have us be poor & hungry & weeping & hated?...No, I don't think that's what He's saying...Nowhere in this passage is Jesus giving us any commands...He doesn't say, "Thou shalt be poor & hungry," or "Thou shalt NOT be rich & happy."...What He is telling us here is something important about God, about how God sees the world...From God's perspective, things are turned up-side down from the way we see them...In God's way of seeing things, those who are down & out are the ones who are blessed,...They hold a special place in God's heart...And those who are doing well, who are on top of the world, are the ones who are in danger of a big come down.

What Jesus is getting at is this. He knows that those who have little, those who are powerless, those who are disheartened, are more likely to look to God, turn to God...More likely to call out, "Lord, Lord,..what am I to do?...Lord, please help me!" ...They are down so low, that the only way they can look is up...up at the only one who can give them the strength to keep going & the hope that things will get better."...It is their deep trust & dependence on God that keeps them connected to God...And it's in this connection to God that they are truly blessed

By contrast, there are those of us who have it good: our wallet is full, our refrigerator is full, our garage is full, our health is good, we love our job, we have everything we want or need...But our lives are so full, that we don't always make room for God...We've worked hard to get where we are...It's easy for us to think we've done pretty good on our own & we don't need anything from anybody, not even God...It isn't that God will punish us for having the things we have; it's that these things can become more important to us than God,... And in effect, we bring woes upon ourselves. ..This is where the struggle comes in for us...How do we who have much keep from ending up on the "woe" side?...Well, Jesus doesn't ask us to become poor & hungry...And He doesn't want us to be overcome with guilt about the good things we have. Rather He wants us to live in ways that acknowledge that everything we have – including our ability to acquire all that we have – depends on God,...comes from G...Jesus doesn't want us to stop working hard & using our God-given skills to get the things we want...What He does want is for us to see the world through His eyes, to share His special love & compassion for the down & out,...& to help those who are too poor & powerless to help themselves...He wants us to gain all that we can...but He also wants us to give all that we can.

My friends, I assume we are all here because we believe in Jesus Christ...We have faith in Jesus Christ...That faith has to show itself in our lives...That faith has to have some effect on the world around us...If we truly believe in Jesus Christ, we will carry on His mission to transform the world into a better place for everyone – a place in which the hungry are fed, the homeless have homes, the naked are clothed, the elderly are cared for, the sick receive adequate health care, & our children – all children – are given everything they need to grow & develop to their God-given potential....*If you have been reading the bulletin & the Catholic Courier over the last few weeks, you know that our diocese has been focusing on "children at risk," as an issue for study & action because of the crucial challenges facing many children in our own communities – especially the poor... Our diocesan Public Policy Commission chose to focus on "children at risk," because NY State is simply not doing enough to provide quality child care & early education for the nearly 900,000 children who live in poverty in our state – 73,000 right here in our diocese. ... There is much to be done & many ways to help, but today you have an opportunity to urge our Governor & legislators to give high priority to children at risk in this year's budget, by signing a petition that will be delivered to Albany along with signed petitions from all the dioceses in NY State... So, please, please take that extra 5 minutes on your way out & stop to read & sign the petition...Do this for those children...for their future...for our future.*

Today's Gosp reminds us that all that we are & all that we have comes not from us, but from God ...We are caretakers of the good things God has given us, & God expects of us that we share those good things with people who have little...Now, I know there are people who would have us believe that such is not our responsibility, that what we have is for us alone...We did the hard work, took the risks, put in the time,...so why shouldn't we keep all of it or most of it for ourselves? ...Those are the people Jesus was speaking to when He pronounced those four woes...essentially telling them, "Enjoy it now,...because that's all your gonna get...you can forget about any eternal reward."

My friends, we have it in us to rise above selfishness...to be people who see Christ in the faces of the poor...& to be Christ for them...We have it in us to be among those to whom Christ will say on that day when we stand before the gates of heaven, "Blessed are you for having made my kingdom more present on earth...The kingdom of heaven now is yours."...It is my hope that everyone of us will one day hear those words." AMEN.