

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 10:24-39

In our Gospel for today Jesus presents himself as a source of division. He says that he will set members of the same family against one another, and that this is the purpose for which he has come. It flies in the face of what we've learned about the mild and gentle Jesus who's great with kids and welcomes everybody.

However, it is close to the heart of the Gospel. Jesus manages to get himself killed for what he says and does. He offends powerful groups among his people. He ends up on a cross, and what he offers us is a cross like his own.

We Christians often run from that reality. We try to cover up the difficulties in our religious life so that we don't rock the boat.

This results in an unhealthy Church community. Sweeping differences under the rug does nothing to resolve them.

Faithfulness to Jesus on anybody's part will bring differences to light. Differences result in conflict, and conflict can be hostile. Jesus said division would occur because of him. He said it was sure to happen. But he does not commission us to be the cause of this division. He does not give us license to turn hostile even against those who are wrong. What he offers us instead is a cross that brings reconciliation, not only between the human race and God, but among people as well. The cross is painfully honest about differences, as well as about hostility. Hostility victimizes the innocent, including the innocent one inside each of us. It promises release and resolution, but what it delivers is retribution, an uninterrupted cycle.

So what's left? Denial and hostility are unacceptable. The remaining alternative is the only creative one: reconciliation, something that is not easy achieve. It requires that we pay attention to people we might otherwise decide to ignore. Shortly after today's Gospel passage, Jesus points to four categories of such people. The kinds of people we must pay attention to include ourselves, prophets, righteous people, and little ones. First, we need to pay attention to ourselves in one regard at least. Jesus says that anybody who welcomes us welcomes him, and thereby welcomes the Father who sent him. As Christians, therefore, we are representatives. We may do well, or poorly at this, but we are representatives. If the Father and Jesus believe, not in denial or hostility, but in reconciliation, then we as their representatives are hardly free to reject reconciliation as impossible.

We are also to pay attention to prophets, people who tell us the truth. Funny thing is, they don't always know they are prophets.

They simply tell us the truth and the truth they tell makes us uncomfortable. It insists that we reach out beyond what is familiar to us. It is a truth we would rather do without.

Truth-telling prophets are a nuisance. It is tempting to ignore them, reject them, punish them. Even when we do, however, God keeps sending still more of them to us. Jesus has some nerve: he tells us to welcome them, to pay attention to what they say.

Jesus tells us also to welcome "righteous" people. They are not self-righteous, they are simply righteous, but even they, like prophets, make us uncomfortable. Righteous people work to maintain right relationships: with other people, with God, with the earth, and even with themselves. People like that strike us as odd, and they are, here in this world where damaged

relationships are the norm, and where conflict, or denial, is the preferred way to exist. Yet Jesus tells us to welcome righteous people. We may have something to learn from them.

Finally, Jesus tells us that we are to show kindness toward "little ones," the powerless, the neglected, and that for them, even small acts of kindness go a long way. We are to welcome them as well.

Surrounded then by these little ones, and righteous people, and prophets, aware of our role as representatives of Jesus and the One who sent him, we may come to see that hostility and denial are simply tragic; they contain no hope, they do nothing to build a new and better world. With people like these travelling with us, we may be ready to venture forth into the unfamiliar world of reconciliation. What we carry on that journey will not be heavy burdens of denial and hostility; we will bear instead the cross of Christ.

If we deal with differences by denial and hostility, then we have designated opponents who are bad because we are good, and the game requires that we ignore the darkness hidden in our own hearts. But if we dare to imagine reconciliation, then something different happens. There is no longer the single group which is no community at all. There are no longer opponents who, because they oppose us, must therefore be evil.

Maybe what happens when we dare to imagine reconciliation is that all the masks come off, and without exception those present are prophets speaking truth; or righteous people living truth; or little ones, the powerless and the wounded.

When we imagine reconciliation, and the masks come off at last, then maybe everybody belongs to at least one of those groups.

And everybody includes us. Any of us may be to others a prophet who speaks truth, a righteous person who lives it, or a

little one wounded or powerless.

When this happens, there's a chance that denial can disappear and conflict can end. Rather than hold hard and fast to our own, we can welcome Christ in the person of a stranger as well as the person of a neighbor. We can welcome prophets and righteous people, the powerless and the wounded, in people we never knew to be such, and they will welcome us in turn, equally startled to find out who their old opponents really are.

The reward for those who do this will be very great. It will be a feast in the presence of God, forever. We experience a foretaste of this feast every time we participate in the Holy Eucharist.

AMEN.