

12th Sunday of Ordinary Time - C (Zech 12:10-11; 13:1; Gal 3:26-29; Lk 9:18-24) By John H. Howard, C.J.M

Way back in 1961 the New York Museum obtained a valuable painting of Henri Matisse entitled "Le Bateau" (The Boat) – it was hung and thousands of visitors came to admire it. However it took sixty-seven days before someone realized it was hung upside down. Somethings are not as obvious as they look. When Jesus asked his disciples "**Who do you say that I am?**" Peter answered "**You are the Christ of God,**" in other words "**The anointed of God, the Messiah.**" It appears that he had the right answer except that most likely he had it upside down and did not realize it as well until after the Resurrection. He was hoping Jesus to be the Messiah of his fantasy, the triumphant Messiah who would continue to make him his right hand man. Except Jesus went on to clarify "**The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.**"

Jesus goes further and says that anyone who wants to be his disciple must be ready to take not the easy way out but the difficult road as well: "**If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me**" (Lk 9:24). If we just take that text literally, being a Christian seems to be quite a dreary task. How does that fit with "**God is love**" (1 Jn 4:8) and "**I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly**" (Jn 10:10) and all the other uplifting texts. What about "**All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete**" (John 15: 11)?

As contradictory as it may sound, it does all fit together. Loving someone means commitment followed by deeds, otherwise it is only words. Remaining faithful to our commitments will always mean efforts and at times suffering. The more we care, the more it hurts when something goes wrong with someone we love. But it is not suffering for suffering's sake. As with Christ, that kind of suffering has a purpose. Love redeems in the end, it makes us better. The person who has never felt loved becomes very selfish and sometimes can turn into a monster. Psychopaths are usually people who have never felt loved by anyone. Being loved and taking the risk to love in return will hurt at times, but it will make us better human beings. Such is the human condition that Jesus chose to share. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: "**He was like us in everything but sin**" (Heb. 4:15).

The pain that comes from caring is not in vain however. We learn that are areas of life where we have control and others where we don't; we cannot control others but we can control ourselves. The sooner we learn to know the difference the better off we are.

In the past and still in most parts of the world there was nothing to take away physical pain. For most of human history surgery, tooth extraction, broken bones, cancer, or child birth all was and is often still done without the benefit of anesthetics. We however been conditioned to fear pain, both physical and emotional pain. We live in a culture not only

where illegal drugs are abundant but where legal drugs are being peddled every day on television. It has become a hobby at my house to count how many pill commercials there will be versus car commercials on the evening news. It creates an expectation that we can escape reality if we have the right drug, legal or illegal. I'm not saying that it is not ok to take something for pain but there are things that must be faced. What brings satisfaction to the soul, what brings happiness is when we learn to face the problems of our life and rather than trying to escape them.

After searching for meaning in his life for over thirty years Saint Augustine turn to the God of his youth and wrote "**We are made for you, O Lord, and we rest only when we rest in you.**" Paraphrasing Augustine I say "**We are made for reality and we can only be happy when we accept it.**" That reality can be who I am, my looks, my level of intelligence, my race, my age, my health whatever. It doesn't mean I don't try to improve myself but before I do that I must first accept the gift of God that I am and not try to compare or escape; it never works.

The disciples wanted the Messiah to bring them salvation but thought it could be achieve the easy way. After all Jesus had proven that he could do miracles: he could heal the sick, raise the dead, make wine out of water, multiply bread and fish, appear with Moses and Isaiah, why not a painless redemption?

Jesus did those as signs, as teaching tools to express compassion, mercy, as act of kindness, as ways to show God's power but never to show off as in the temptation after his forty days in the desert. Sin however is only defeated by love and there is no shortcuts to love, it can only be proven by actions not words alone.

We hear a lot about extremes these days. There are programs like "**Extreme Adventures**" "**Extreme Sports**" "**Extreme make over**" for people, for houses, for cars, for gardens, you name it. The example that Jesus gives us in the Gospel can also be labeled "**Extreme Love.**" He teaches us that caring to the ultimate is the way to go. He himself gave his life because he cared. "**There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends.**" (Jn 15:13) It is extreme to say love should extend to those who don't deserve it. That has never been accepted too well and therefore it is poorly applied to this day. "**To you who hear me, I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who curse you and pray for those who maltreat you...Do to others what you want them to do to you**" (Lk 6:27, 31). On the extreme adventure programs we are warned not to attempt it at home or we might get hurt. In the case of Jesus' "**Extreme Love,**" if we attempt that at home we are in danger of becoming a saint. Be aware, your homeowner's insurance may not cover it.