

Legacy
Reflections on John 13: 31-35
Fifth Sunday Easter ~ May 6, 2007

[A second homily around the theme of Christianity
and small, intentional and inclusive communities]

This short passage raises issues of loss, legacy and love.

Loss

The exchange between Judas and Jesus is more elaborate in John than in the other Gospels. This is a psychologically and dramatically intense passage.

If we go back some ten verses (v. 21) for context, we have Jesus announcing that “one of you” will betray me. Consternation follows, caught graphically by Leonardo da Vinci in his masterpiece on the Last Supper.

Simon Peter tries valiantly to determine who it is, with signals and cues. Jesus identifies the betrayer, looking him squarely in the eye and offering him bread. It is a powerful scene. In effect, Jesus says “If you are going to do this, if you must, do what you have to do quickly.”

Judas leaves immediately. The death of Jesus is sealed. Jesus knows this; the disciples do not. John says that they reasoned that Judas left to settle financial expenses for the dinner since he was the treasurer for the community. They assumed that betrayal might not be so ominous that it would lead to death, a betrayal, perhaps, of principles or idealism but not of the very person of the Messiah. Jesus, after all, gave Judas bread and spoke with him.

John brings us into verse 31, today’s passage, with three quick repetitive lines. Judas left immediately. It was night. Only when Judas had gone does Jesus continue.

There is a sense of loss. An empty place at the table. The dinner suddenly turns from celebration to a farewell supper.

Legacy

Death is in the air.

“Little children,” Jesus says, the only time in the Gospels this term is used. “I can be with you only a little longer.” “Where I am going, you cannot come.” What do I wish for you? What do I want for you? What difference have I made, what legacy do I leave?

The legacy is simple, direct: “Love one another.” Jesus now adds a characteristic of this love which makes it different from the way people were summoned to love in the Hebrew Bible, “As I have loved you.” Jesus and what he is about to do is to be the model for this love.

Once the death of Jesus is unavoidable, the first thought that comes to his mind is legacy. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Love

The next line is astonishing. “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, by your love for one another.” This makes the love sacramental, a sign, a badge of honor, the testimony and proof of what it means to be a Christian. Neither creeds nor allegiance to an institution are mentioned. These are not bad; they are less important.

We know that people cannot love one another institutionally. An institution, in its essence, is abstract, juridical, vast, anonymous.

Jesus does not call the apostles to generic, anonymous, institutional love. He summons them to a love that is familiar and reciprocal. Love does not happen without a face, a name. We cannot love a people; we love someone.

If Christianity is going to be an institution, it must become an institution which is primarily a gathering or assembly of small communities where everyone knows everyone else. Without this, we have institutional evasion, marginalizing love.

Christianity is meant for house churches, not basilicas. This is because love is not incidental to Christianity but its primary sacrament.

History proves that Christianity survives all persecutions in its house churches. It endures even though the institutional structures and leadership are destroyed. It did this in the Roman Empire, throughout the Soviet Union, in times when Japan and China sought to exterminate Christianity.

It is not orthodoxy or a Pope who rescue Christianity. Nor a Bible. It is a gathering of friends who break bread in faith and love one another. Orthodoxy, papacy or Scripture may help communities overcome their narrowness and idiosyncrasy. But they do not validate communities; the reverse is true. An orthodoxy that does not create community is sterile. The Bible comes to life, not in its literalness, but in the community it creates and in the communities which receive it. The Bible is not meant to give us creeds or right thinking but communities in which people love one another.

Christianity is a gathering of friends who break bread in faith and love one another.

Secularity today is eroding institutions because people sense that institutions have destroyed communities.

We never stop looking for friends, never stop creating family life and rejoicing in it.

It is easier to close a parish than a circle of friends, easier to excommunicate an institutional member than someone who is part of your family.

As Jesus faces death, he asks us to love one another, make it a sacrament, gather in love, not in obligation. He tells us that if we come together and remember him, we must do so through our love for one another.

Everything else is less important. Nothing else is indispensable.

If you do this, my death, Jesus indicates, will be worth it. And I shall live again in your homes and assemblies, in all the ways friendship and family happen. Remember me this way and forget everything else.

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