

3rd Sunday – Cycle A
January 22, 2017
Holy Spirit (SH/HT)

Is 8:23-9:3
I Cor 1:10-13, 17
Matt 4:12-23

I. It seems the main theme of everything we hear about in the media, and the kinds of issues we deal with locally, revolve around the divisions among us. We hear constant talk of conflicts, protests, demonstrations and people who deal with their anger and discontent through violence.

- nationally, we see this happening in all sorts of ways as our politicians continue to wrangle with one another, finding ways to disagree and sabotage each others' efforts to lead. Racism has become an issue that has surfaced, once again, among us. As a nation, we find it difficult to agree on almost anything.
- Today marks the somber anniversary of Roe vs. Wade: the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion among us. Conflict about respect life issues, especially abortion, continues to polarize us. This issue has torn us apart ever since 1973.
- We are in the middle of an octave of prayer for Christian unity – which began last Wednesday, Jan. 18 and will continue until this Wednesday, Jan. 25, the conversion of St. Paul. Why do we have an octave of prayer for Christian Unity? Because we are divided! Instead of being one community – as Jesus prayed - we Christians are divided among hundreds of denominations. The divisions among us become a contrary sign of unity to the world. The Christian message loses credibility.

II. Unfortunately, divisions among us are not new: they have been the source of violence and wars down through the centuries

- Paul addressed divisions in the early Christian community. The Christian community in Corinth was torn by rivalries. They pledged allegiance to a specific leader – like Paul, or Apollos or Cephas – instead of all of them focusing on Jesus as the center of their faith. He urged them to agree with one another, that they be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

But how do we do that? How do we overcome divisions? It sounds easier said than done.

II. Perhaps it would help if we look at the nature of the Christian call to discipleship – and the conversion that call necessarily implies. Conversion as a disciple of Jesus implies change – that we are willing to grow develop.

Candidates for political office put themselves forward: they say I want to do this – and so they build their case and campaign eliciting the support of voters. But there are some, many, in fact, in public service, for example, like those “called” or nominated to serve in the president’s cabinet, who do not put themselves forward but are asked to do so. They have to *grow* into that job; they have to learn what their new job entails.

Similarly with being called to be a disciple of Jesus. We do not put ourselves forward to follow Jesus: Jesus asks us to follow *him*.

In the gospel today, we see Jesus calling his first apostles. They had to change – they had to change dramatically – give up where they were, what they were doing – and be willing to learn from Jesus. They had to grow in what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus.

That is the nature of each of our calls to be a disciple of Jesus – at some point we felt a call. It may be we took ownership of our baptism as a infant and as we grew, we internalized and realized a *personal* conversion to Jesus. We told ourselves – this business of following Jesus, the life of living as a Christian, and as a Catholic, makes sense – this is for me. This is the kind of life I want to live.

But that isn’t all there is – we must be willing to continually grow and change and mature as a disciple of Jesus.

III. Living and growing as a disciple of Jesus is key to overcoming division and building harmony. That will lead us to become a people of one mind with the same purpose.

Two simple steps can lead us in that direction:

1) First, remember we are following a person – not an idea. We have lots of great ideas and wonderful theology – but all of that should support our focus on Jesus as a person: we follow a person, not a concept or ideology.

- whenever we are confronted with the stresses caused by division, the anxiety, the turmoil, we should ask – what attitudes are Christian in this situation? How does the Christian vision inform my perspective?
- and what is a distinctly Christian way to respond? What words would Jesus use in this situation? What actions show that I am truly responding as a disciple of Jesus?

2) Secondly, we need to remember we are part of a community. Jesus called together a *community* of disciples – not just a bunch of disconnected individuals. The Corinthian community was forgetting they were a community – a community formed by their faith in Jesus - and then fell into bickering and rivalries and envy.

Christian communities need to commit themselves to a common life of love and respect and working together as disciples of Jesus. When that happens we develop skills and models which can be applied to our family life, our work environments, our civic commitments in our community.

Christians, disciples of Jesus, can be catalysts for harmony, instruments of reconciliation when they remember, A) they are attached to a person, not an ideology and b) when they work together as a community.

IV. All of the noise, the division, the bickering among us is similar to an orchestra warming up. Before the concert, each instrument is playing differently – it is dissonant, just a racket – it even hurts the ears. But the maestro picks up the baton and draws the musicians into harmony, creating a sound of beauty which lifts the soul.

What of us? Can we envision the harmony we so desperately want among us? You and I can't heal all the division in the world, but we can work on that first in our families, among our friends, in the local communities we are part of.

Can our ongoing conversion to Jesus help us to build this harmony?

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