

1st Sunday of Lent

The school shooting in Parkland Florida has confronted our trust. We trust that a school our family patronizes will not suffer the same fate. We trust that kids will not obtain assault weapons. We trust that parents raise their children with the right values. We trust that those who own weapons do so for noble purposes. We trust that the NRA wants a peaceful society. We trust that politicians want to limit irresponsible access to automatic rifles. But then a school shooting happens in the US, eighteen times in the first 46 days of 2018. Something is wrong in the character of our great nation, and we feel it like a broken trust.

Sometimes we choose to break a relationship, especially in commerce. If the car you buy turns out to be a lemon, you'll never buy another one like it. If the store you patronize sells you damaged goods, you'll never go back there again. In small ways we punish those who break our trust. It becomes more serious in families, especially between spouses. They have made a solemn promise, and if one party breaks it, it is hard to restore confidence. If a parent makes an arrangement with a child and then does something else, the disappointed child may cry, "But you promised." They are words that cut to the heart. We prefer to think of ourselves as victims of broken trust, not as perpetrators.

The stakes get even higher in our relationship with God. We believe that God is love, that God cares for us in times of need, and that God wills our happiness. When things don't turn out this way - when we face unexpected hardship, when prayers for a better life go unanswered, or when people we love face danger - we start to wonder what is going on. We have placed our trust in God. Has God forgotten the covenant?

That is the question that opens Lent in today's first reading and responsorial psalm. Noah and his ark have filled our imaginations since childhood, animals entering two by two, and old jokes about why God saved both mosquitoes. But today's passage relates the end of the story. The reason the waters came was God's anger with us, but the reason they receded was God's covenant with us. God even placed a rainbow in the sky in testimony that he would never again destroy the earth. In Psalm 25 today, our cantor sang, "Good and just is the Lord... God guides... and teaches." It also says, "the sinner knows the way," and that is because God has not given up on the sinner. Even when we break the covenant, God remains faithful.

We sometimes evaluate the covenant the other way around: Why should we remain in it if - as it may seem to us - God became unfaithful? But today's readings, stretching all the way back to the first book of the bible, shout this message at the beginning of Lent: "There is a God. There is a covenant. Our covenant with God is sure." That will become evident at the end of Lent when we walk once more through Holy Week in communion with Jesus, the perfect exemplar of God's faithful love for us. No weapon should shake that confidence.

Many covenants do not last. Sometimes they break up because of the other party, but sometimes it's our own fault. We cannot always understand why we get bad news, but Lent aims to lift us up: Do not lose heart. We have a covenant. It has not been broken. It has been fulfilled.

Sunday, February 18, 2018