

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Rock” is a word I sometimes hear people use to characterize their spouse. It often comes up after one partner has died. I’ll ask the survivor, “How would you describe this person who married you?” “My rock,” they’ll say. It’s inspiring to hear people talk about their marriage under such titles. It’s easy to love someone who is the source of your strength.

Our responsorial today, Psalm 18, recites a litany of titles like this for God: rock, fortress, savior, shield, saving strength, stronghold. And every time the psalm uses the personal pronoun “my”. God isn’t just “a rock”; God is my rock, my fortress, my savior. The opening words of this psalm are, “I love you, Lord.” Those words should not be surprising because that’s how we feel about people who are our rock. But they are surprising because rarely does anyone in the bible address these words to God: “I love you.” Moses and Jesus both told us to love the Lord our God and to show it by our deeds. But rarely does someone say to God, “I love you.” Maybe it seems too intimate. But here it is. Psalm 18 opens up that way.

You have probably had many occasions when you felt that God was your rock, your fortress, and your shield. That will explain why you can sing along with the refrain of our psalm today, “I love you, Lord, my strength.” The reason we love the Lord is his strength.

The Jewish people attending Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last week probably felt the same way going into the building for worship on the sabbath. They were there because they loved God, their strength and their shield. The gunman who assassinated 11 members of the congregation shook that belief. This past Monday the synagogue of Kehilath Israel in Overland Park invited people from the Kansas City area to a prayer vigil. Bishop Johnston and I decided to go. We left here in plenty of time, but we almost arrived there late because of the number of cars backed up to get into the lot. We could not park close. You’ve heard the expression, “We had to walk a mile”? Well, we had to walk a mile. Over 3000 people tried to get into that service. As we elbowed our way up front, we spoke with one of the organizers, who expressed her gratitude that so many people had come to support them. She said to me, “I’ll be honest with you. I’m afraid. This shooting has made us afraid.” But the religious leaders who spoke one after another that night assured the local Jewish community that we are all brothers and sisters, and we stand with them against hatred and violence. We will worship God, and no one can stop us.

Psalm 18 proclaims that God is our strength, but Moses and Jesus remind us that strength also dwells within us. We love our God’s strength with all our strength. And if you love yourself with all your strength, then that’s how you’re supposed to love your neighbor - every neighbor. Hate crimes happen because some people have never fully embodied this message. Any of us may discover that we do not even hang out with people of other ethnicities, races or political parties - much less love them. We want no hate, but we may first have to uproot it from our own hearts. Getting rid of hate is only one step. Tolerating someone else is a further step. Loving them is the greatest step of all. Yet Jesus commands us to love. When we do, we are not far from the kingdom of God.

Sunday, November 4, 2018