

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Peaceful protesting is not too distant from what Jesus advocates in the gospel today: Try to work out differences privately; if that doesn't work, get a few colleagues together; if that doesn't work, then involve the community. "The right of people peaceably to assemble," as the Bill of Rights puts it, permits gathering companions to communicate a point. Jesus never advocates looting and violence; those are no ways to resolve conflicts. In fact, they run counter to Saint Paul's command in today's passage from the Letter to the Romans.

Near the end of each of Paul's letters, he typically addresses a few practical concerns that have come to his attention. In the verses prior to the ones we just heard he has ordered obedience to public officials. He writes, "Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed." Paul says if you obey the law, you have no need to fear civil authority. Paul concludes that section of Romans with this practical advice: "This is why you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Christians, like everyone else, need to pay up whatever debt we owe.

That sets up the opening of the passage we hear today. Paul, no friend of economic debt, addresses a different debt that each of us has. He writes, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." At first, this seems impossible. How can you owe love? If you owe it, how can it be love? Love is given freely. That is its nature. Well, Paul has already shared that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That love creates an expectation that we will love back. Because God's love is complete, our love too needs to be inexhaustible. If God can love everyone, including those who are unlovable to us, then God bids us to do the same. Paul cites several of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet." He says these are summed up in one command from the Book of Leviticus, which we know as the second great commandment taught by Jesus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That means loving each neighbor, even those of a different race or political party, even those who commit crimes or sin against us. As these commandments are phrased in the negative, stating what you shall not do, so Paul sums this up with his own negative statement: "Love does no evil to the neighbor"—even to the neighbor who has done evil to you. You break the cycle.

Because of racial and political tensions coming to light in our country we have a golden opportunity to mature as individuals and as a nation. Two temptations we often face are prejudice that reduces every person different from us into a stereotypical emanation of complete evil, and retaliation against those who harm us. Neither prejudice nor retaliation fulfills the command to love our neighbor. We can be better than those who will not even listen to a neighbor or who foster hatred on our streets. Such people think they owe no one anything. But they do. We all do. We owe everyone love.

Sunday, September 6, 2020