

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“What were you arguing about?” is a question the disciples did not want to answer. When Jesus asked, they remained silent. He laced the question with a phrase that discomfited them more: “What were you arguing about on the way?” “The way” is how some first Christians referred to their belief. So the question means something like, “What were you arguing about, you who are Christians?” The disciples did not all get along with one another, like members of any group. Luke reports that this conversation took place stunningly at the Last Supper. Immediately after Jesus said, “This is my body, this is my blood,” he foretold his passion and betrayal, and, as in today’s gospel, “an argument broke out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest”—right at the Last Supper, right after Jesus talked about his upcoming death. Perhaps this is why in John’s account of that meal Jesus gave the pointed command: “Love one another.” He sounds like a parent admonishing children to get along and behave.

Arguing has become a skill that many Americans seek to perfect, along with the belief that we are always right. Pride and wrath are among the traditional seven deadly sins, but they have become virtues to many Americans, along with four more of those sins: greed, envy, lust and gluttony. Our culture feeds and promotes the desire for superiority, scorn, money, property, sex and food. The only one of the traditional seven sins that is still a sin in America is the last one, sloth. We don’t have much patience for people we consider lazy. If our economy is to thrive and feed our greed, people have to work—and argue.

In truth, Jesus does not criticize arguing in this passage. He himself argued, even with religious leaders of his day. Instead, he asked what the topic was, what they considered worthy of their emotion. It was pride. This topic surfaced right after Jesus predicted the lowliness of his Passion. He anticipated a violent death before his resurrection. He loved the disciples enough to share his deep concern about his future. But they were indifferent to his needs and turned instead to their own. They were incompetent in showing compassion. Their personal arrogance so blinded them they missed the worryment of the One they loved the most.

To avoid that trap, maybe we should let Jesus ask the same question to us. “Hey, you who are Christians, you who are on the way, what were you arguing about?” Like the disciples, we may prefer to remain silent, but let’s think about it. Over the past week, when did you argue? Whom was it with? Was it someone you despise? Or someone you love? What did you argue about on the way? Although the discussion was about one thing, was it really about something else—pride, greed, envy, for example? Did the argument blind you from showing compassion to someone else? Can you tell now if you were indifferent to someone else’s need?

Jesus concludes this episode by taking a child into the circle to show how receiving a child in his name is receiving him. He did not resolve which of them was the greatest. That didn’t matter to him. Instead of selecting the greatest, he taught them to care for the least. Arguments sometimes keep us from noticing who needs care—something we should notice while we are on the way.

Sunday, September 19, 2021