

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sued the federal government to restore the abruptly suspended funding promised their care for refugees. The USCCB explained, “Refugees are individuals who have undergone special screening and vetting procedures by the U.S. government and are fleeing hardship and persecution in their home countries to resettle in the United States.” Our church has long helped ease the burdens of refugees by providing shelter, clothing, food, and training. Christ commanded us to serve those in need. On the broader topic of migrants, Pope Francis wrote a letter of support to the same bishops a couple of weeks ago, saying he recognizes “the right of a nation to defend itself and keep communities safe from those who have committed violent or serious crimes while in the country or prior to arrival. That said, the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty... damages the dignity of many men and women.” Pope Francis contrasts the Christian view that every person has dignity with the opinion that favors a “concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups.” Christians are to love our neighbor, love the stranger, and most shockingly, according to Jesus today, love our enemies.

To prepare us for that message, we heard a reading from the First Book of Samuel. King Saul had taken young David into his court, where David befriended the king’s son Jonathan. But Saul grew jealous of David’s abilities and gathered 3,000 of his best soldiers to track David down and kill him. On the lam, David unexpectedly entered a cave where Saul was asleep. David had a perfect chance to kill his enemy, but he had too much respect for his king. So David did something better. As proof of his opportunity, he stole the king’s spear, crossed over to the opposite slope, and in an outright taunt, shouted back to the troops that if they wanted the king’s spear, come and get it. In these actions, David won back King Saul’s respect, and their feud was abated. Even enemies owe respect for the human person.

In response to this reading, we could have sung praise of David, but we sang a psalm about the Lord: “The Lord is kind and merciful.” Singing that responsorial with these readings implies that our sins have made us enemies of God. God has the right to punish us when we fail to love. But instead, we hear these incredible words from Psalm 103: “Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.”

The dustup between the American Catholic bishops and the federal government invites our entire society to reflect on our values. Of course we treasure love. Of course we want to help the less fortunate. Of course the love for our family and country are unique commitments. But when Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, he reminded us about one characteristic of the love we treasure. Our capacity to love is enormous. Many parents say that when a child was born, they discovered more love inside them than they ever knew they had. We owe love to one another. We have it inside us. Even more than David, the LORD has shown us how to live: slow to anger and abounding in kindness.