

ORDINARY SUNDAY IV “C” JANUARY 30/31, 2010

Confrontation, in any relationship (if we are truly honest) is never easy. Confrontation forces us to take a long, hard, honest look at the values, attitudes, and beliefs which underlie our words and/or deeds. Confrontation is not the same as “telling someone off” or some more colorful colloquial expression. That is verbal abuse, and is a serious sin against the dignity of another human being. Healthy confrontation is an agent of personal, psychological and spiritual growth; an act of love. It means someone loves me enough to challenge me to reach my full God-given potential.

Confrontation stands front and center in today’s liturgy. In the story of Jeremiah’s call by God to be his prophet, God pulls no punches as he tells Jeremiah that he and his message will face resistance. God promises him that He will pour out his Spirit upon Jeremiah to make him a “fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass” (Jr. 1:18). Even though Jeremiah will face resistance from the people, they will “not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jr. 1:19).

Of all the prophets, Jesus most identified with and quoted Jeremiah. In today’s gospel this is borne out. Having applied to himself the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the “servant of God” sent to inaugurate the promised “day of the Lord,” Jesus immediately faces opposition from his own townspeople and confronts their closed mindedness. So angry do they become that they try to hurl Jesus off a cliff on the edge of town in an attempt to kill him for blasphemy.

St. Paul in today’s epistle reading also engages in confrontation. His quotation of the early Christian “hymn to love” (a favorite of brides and grooms for their wedding liturgy) in its original context had nothing to do with weddings. Paul is dealing with a Corinthian church community that is deeply divided by factionalism. Individuals and groups have aligned themselves behind their “favorite” apostle: Peter, Apollos, Paul himself and some have created their own “pure” brand of following Christ. Paul reminds them that they all belong to the one body of Christ. They are to “love one another” with patience, kindness, humility, respect, forgiveness and forbearance,

confronting the issues that divide them and continue the hard work of bringing unity to their community.

All of this has relevance for our life today. How willingly is each of us to be confronted personally, and as a parish, by the gospel of Jesus and interpreted by the authoritative teaching of the Church through its councils and the persons of the pope and bishops? For example: the Church which speaks uncompromisingly about the evil of abortion speaks in equally strong language against the use of the death penalty against criminals. The Church that speaks against euthanasia also insists that a fundamental human right is accessible and affordable health care for all people. The Church that decries human slavery also supports the right of workers to organize as unions; of the right of people to migrate from one country to another to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves and their families and for the receiving nations, while exercising necessary safeguards to protect their security, to welcome and treat immigrants with dignity and respect, helping to provide housing, a just working wage and access to health care. As I listen to, and engage in conversations, I regularly encounter Catholics whose values and views of such moral issues are determined more by partisan politics, talk radio, television, and the internet than by the gospel or church teaching. Our nation's bishops have consistently reminded us that neither major political party in our country can claim to embrace the fullness of gospel or church teaching. Along with this same vein it is not uncommon today for some Catholics to "church shop" within our tradition or outside it to find a priest or minister, a parish or church that makes them "feel good" and/or agrees with their particular theology, spirituality, piety or political stance.

The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale once said that it is the Church's job to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. As we listen and reflect on the Scriptures at Mass each Sunday, God speaks his word of truth with love and invites us to engage in the hard work of confrontation. Another word for it is conversion. We can remain as we are; or risk being changed. The choice is ours.