

ORDINARY SUNDAY III “A”

JANUARY 25/26, 2020

Following his baptism by John, today’s Gospel tells us Jesus takes up residence in Capernaum in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This region to the west of the Jordan River was known as the “Galilee of the Gentiles”. Mostly Jewish, it was surrounded by Gentile peoples (considered “pagans” by religiously observant Jews; sinners standing outside of the Covenant and its promises given by God to Moses and the Hebrew people) being a people who “walked in darkness” as Isaiah relates. This detail is important. In beginning his public ministry Jesus does not go to the religiously observant—“the saved”, but in the word used frequently by Pope Francis to the “peripheries”, to the margins and the marginalized. We often speak of the peripheries as being populated by the poor, immigrants, refugees and other powerless peoples. True enough. Today, however, I’d like to suggest another group that dwells on the peripheries; people close to home, people within our own community, people within our own families.

Over the last 50 years, more than 26 million Americans have left the Catholic faith. The reasons are many but always unique to each individual. In the past several decades alone, baptisms have fallen by more than 40%; sacramental marriages have plummeted by two-thirds; and the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass every week has dropped from more than half to just over 20%. Approximately 4 out of every 10 “born and raised” Catholics no longer identify as Catholics and for every person in the United States who converts or comes into full communion in the Catholic Faith, seven leave. The second largest religious denomination in our country after Catholics is former Catholics. This past year marked the first time that a majority of Hispanics in the United States said they no longer identify as Catholics. Although the recent scandals have contributed to this trend, involvement of Catholics in the life of the Church—usually measured by attendance at Sunday Mass—has been declining for many decades. Personal observation as pastor bears this out as I read, file and compare with previous filings the annual statistical report the parish submits to the archdiocese each spring. From conversations with many of you I know, too, of your concern and suffering over this phenomena present in your immediate and extended families.

Today's Gospel not only tells us of Jesus beginning his public ministry by going to the peripheries, it also is the story of the call of the first disciples. In his mission of bringing the Gospel of God's salvation and establishing the Kingdom of God in this world, Jesus is not a "lone ranger" but chooses to associate others--Peter, Andrew, James and John, ordinary people, with him in his work. Like the land of Zebulun and Naphtali this fact is also important. Through baptism and confirmation Jesus has called each of us to be his co-workers, his disciples. We, too, are called to go to the peripheries not just the periferies in our world or society but also into the "mission territory" close to home; those with whom we live, work and socialize who, number we no longer see or are no longer involved with us in an active Church life.

To these we are sent to bring, or re-ignite, the light of faith. Finger-wagging, haranguing, condemning are not the way of Jesus, nor should they be ours. In the Gospels the only people Jesus pointed an angry finger at were the self-righteous "holier than thou". St. Francis deSales whose feast day was this past Friday gives us good advice. Francis. was very successful in re-connecting persons who had left the Church in and around Geneva, Switzerland at the time of the Reformation. His strategy? Simply stated: "You attract more flies with a teaspoon of honey than you do with gallons of vinegar." Francis', like Jesus', was a sower, generously offering the seed of hospitality, invitation, kindness, compassion, friendship and dialog. Like Jesus, Francis did not fret over results. His was the job to sow seed and leave the rest to the grace of God in the heart of those with whom he associated. A promise to pray for someone who is sick; reaching out at a time of family or personal crisis with a listening ear and heart; seeking to heal a past personal hurt or hurt suffered within the church community; inviting someone to come with you to Mass or another church event who hasn't been in a while and sit with you—are just a few small ways that can be light that touches darkened or indifferent hearts.

A people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Where are the periferies to which God is sending me as light, as sower?

26 January, 2020
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