

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Cycle A (September 4, 2011)

The worst advice a pastor once gave me was, "Peace at all costs." And so he lived his life and ministered in his parish...peace at all costs. Except there is a huge price to be paid if you have to have the semblance of peace when underneath is conflict. Avoiding conflict is like avoiding the big elephant in the room, for to acknowledge the elephant means upsetting one's life and allowing life's "messiness" to surface.

When we refuse to deal with conflict, it will deal with us in ways that are always damaging. Many years ago a troubled family was making life difficult for all in the parish, particularly in the school. Tensions existed with the teachers and principal, but no one wanted to confront the problem of a painful marriage...a disturbing relationship causing much havoc at home and everywhere else; we leave home with all our "baggage" bringing conflict into the ordinary situations of life. The conflict was never allowed to be brought into the light by any of us in the parish and it was allowed to fester and deepen until everything exploded.

Everyone knew the pain but were afraid to deal with it until it was too late. Who wants to deal with a very destructive family situation that will cause a lot of confusion if these problems came to the surface? Who wants to disrupt what we perceive to be peace but in reality is just a refusal to confront and a refusal to except responsibility to be an instrument of healing. Peace at all costs...no such thing.

Jesus gives us a way to deal with conflict by first acknowledging that there is a problem. He begins by asking the person who has been wronged to do the confronting: go to the person and explain why you feel that you were hurt. If this doesn't work, get one or two others to help in the confrontation; if this doesn't work, then involve some authority. This way of dealing with conflict can be engaged either by the person who is hurt or by the one who caused the hurt. Jesus makes it clear: we need to realize that conflicts are a part of life and need to be expressed if healing is to occur. Running away from conflict or simply refusing to admit a problem is not a gospel way of living through life's troubles and difficulties.

Can you imagine how differently things would have turned out when considering the sexual abuse crisis in the Church. Victims did come forward only to be denied access to justice. The response to this terrible abuse of trust: cover it up...sweep it under the table. Peace at all costs, especially to the image of the Church was the guiding force. What about the self-image of the child or teen? When we refuse to deal with conflict it will deal with us...

Sometimes even the process that Jesus lays out doesn't bring a peaceful resolution. Maybe the hurt is too egregious and needs time; maybe the person just isn't ready. Even here the response of Jesus is one of *compassion*: treat the person who won't/can't listen as a tax collector or Gentile. And how did Jesus treat these people? He loved them and continued to pray for them.

Prayer...the power of prayer is ultimately what is needed in life's painful moments and conflicts: wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, prayers are answered. The law of prayer is the law to love...and we must love at all costs. Loving at all costs is the only reality that brings us deep peace...the peace that only God can give.