

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

This weekend our nation celebrates 239 years since the founding fathers declared their independence from England. They wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

We can think of these words as being prophetic. When we say this, we often think of “prophetic” in terms of either speaking against the establishment or being able to see in the future. The first sense of the prophet is an “anti” view—the modern prophet is antigovernment, antichurch, and antiestablishment. The second sense of prophet is a visionary view. We certainly see both views in the Scriptures: Ezekiel was against the establishment of a corrupt generation, but he also proclaimed a future reality, one that the Israelite people did not want to hear. We hear these senses in our patriotic speak: our founding fathers spoke out against the tyranny of the king of England; they spoke of a better tomorrow for our nation.

While these senses of prophecy are true, the foundation from which the prophet is able to speak is his relationship with God—the prophet is always pro-God, pro-covenant, and pro-faithfulness. For the prophet is one who speaks in God’s name and with God’s authority. As such, none of us is equipped to be a prophet because of what we have done but by who we are—one incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism.

Based on his or her relationship with God, the prophet has a mission that is entrusted to him or her: to speak in God’s name and in God’s authority to the people. At our baptism, each one of us was charged to go into the world, carrying the flame of faith, to bring the light of Christ to those living in darkness.

A prophet sometimes is set apart, but most often, the prophet lives in the midst of the community. This is the sense in which Pope Francis spoke

about the leaders of the church “smelling like the sheep.” Whether set apart or living as a member of the community, the prophet always lives within the tradition of the law of God since a prophet is also recognized as speaking in God’s name and in his authority.

Most important, the prophet relies upon the power of Christ. Since the prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house, he must rely not upon his own resources but on the power that comes from Christ. For the prophet faces many different obstacles: God never tells Ezekiel that it would be easy to be a prophet. “Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, rebels who have rebelled against me.” But God does tell him, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Answering the call to be a prophet is to place our trust in God. The gospel reading tells us about Jesus returning to his hometown and the reaction he met. One of the obstacles that each prophet faces is prejudices—whether about ourselves or about others: “I am not good enough to speak God’s word.” “I could never go to [Iowa] because those people [live next to pigs].”

God is inviting each one of us to heed his call and do something. The Eucharist invites us to listen to God’s word and to come to know the truth more deeply. How is God calling us to speak in his name and in his authority? To whom are we sent? Are we going to let our pre-conceptions, our fears, our mistrusts, our prejudices get in the way or are we going to trust the God who promises that “power is made perfect in weakness?”

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Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In our modern world, many people have been asking a very important question: what is the mission of the church in the world today? There seem to be as many answers to this question as there are Christians: some would say it is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” others would say it is “to preserve truth,” others would say it is “to gather the people together,” and others would say other things altogether. The mission of the church seems to be a vague and multi-faceted reality. Indeed it is. All of these are true. We can lose focus on the church’s mission by reducing it to any one aspect.

The opening sentence of the gospel is a sharp reminder of the fundamental nature of the mission of the church in the world today: “Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits.”

“Jesus *summoned* the Twelve and began to *send* them out.” First and foremost, the church always responds to the Lord Jesus. It is Christ himself who summons us together; it is Christ himself who sends us forth. The church is always about responding to the invitation of Jesus Christ. It is the work of God that is being completed—not our desires, not our charity. It is why the Lord Jesus tells the Twelve that they are to bring nothing with them—because when we do the work of God, we must depend upon God alone. As soon as we start worrying about how to take care of things, how to fund things, how to provide for ourselves, we stop focusing and depending upon God and try to become gods ourselves. Since Jesus summons us and sends us out, it is on him we are to depend.

“Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out *two by two*.” Jesus never sends out the apostles all by themselves, but they are always sent in pairs or groups. Jesus tells us that when two or three gather, he is present with them. It is “Paul and Barnabas” who are sent to the Gentiles by the early church; it is “Peter and James”; it is “Paul and Silas”; it is “Peter and John-Mark”; and so on. Jesus knows that when we try to do it all by ourselves, we will fail. It is too hard to stay on target all alone. We need others; we need the church. The role of the church is to support one another in times of trial as well as to celebrate in times of joy. Jesus is clear that this is not an easy task—the apostles were going to be rejected and thrown out of

homes and towns, but two are stronger than one. Jesus sends us out two by two to accomplish his mission.

“Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, and *gave them authority over unclean spirits.*” Notice how they used this authority: they preached repentance. Their authority comes not from themselves, but in the same proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ: repent and believe the Gospel. It is the same message we hear every year on Ash Wednesday; it is the same message we hear each and every time we gather together.

This Eucharist celebrates the mission of the church: we are summoned by the Lord Jesus in community to go forth and glorify the Lord with our lives. We receive and believe in him so much that we are strengthened to proclaim our faith in him. We turn back to the Father and participate in the saving mystery of Jesus Christ. We are sent to announce the Good News to everyone we meet. And when we do this, we will drive out unclean spirits, we will heal people’s troubled lives, we will bring the good news of salvation to those who have forgotten or rejected God.

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