

## 23<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (September 5, 2021)

We are in the midst of a series of readings from the letter of St. James, one of the twelve apostles, for our second reading. It's a rather short letter—only five chapters—but it packs a powerful punch. This is especially true in its challenge to be aware of those in need, of our attitude toward those in need, and how we need to respond to them. For example, James challenges to 'show no partiality': don't show special favor to the man with gold rings and fine clothes while ignoring the poor person in shabby clothes. If he were writing today, our author might ask how we regard multi-millionaire pro athletes or movie stars compared to our attitude toward the person standing at a street corner holding a 'please help' sign, you're waiting there at a red light, and you try to avoid making eye contact. St. James concludes: "did not God chose those who are poor in the world to be...heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?"

For a powerful example of someone who lived out that challenge and who did so for decades in some of the poorest, most poverty-stricken places in the world, consider a saint from our own time: St. Teresa of Calcutta—Mother Teresa. This is a very fitting time to remember her: she was canonized by Pope Francis five years ago yesterday—September 4, 2016. And her feast day is September 5, the day on which she died in 1997. St. Teresa had been a teacher in India in the earlier years of her religious life, but in 1948 she had a strong sense that God was calling her to serve the poorest of the poor.

So she began to do just that. She went into the streets of Calcutta and began meeting and helping the poor, the sick, and the dying—one person at a time, being present face to face to those who had nothing and no place to call home. She certainly played no favorites, she showed no partiality to any person or group based on religion, ethnicity, language or any other such factor. Rather, she gave herself to whoever was most in need of the human touch—a friendly smile, a helping hand, whatever she could do. That, after all, is what genuine love is—the gift of oneself to another for the sake of the other. Other women noticed what she was doing; inspired by her example, they wanted to join in her work. This was the beginning of the Missionaries of Charity, a religious order of nuns dedicated to serving the poorest of the poor and who now serve in over 100 countries around the entire world.

We might be tempted to ask what was St. Teresa's secret...but it was really no secret. She simply lived out in a radical way the call to love, to give of herself to the specific person in front of her who was in need—no matter who or what that person was or whatever that person did or did not do. Pope Francis in his homily at her canonization described her work so well and urging us to follow her example: "our only criterion for action is gratuitous love, free from every ideology and all obligations, offered freely to everyone without distinction of language, culture, race or religion."

And why was St. Teresa able to give herself so completely to those who the rest of the world seemed to ignore completely? A bishop from North Carolina once was in Calcutta and was visiting her; Mother Teresa asked him if he wanted to meet Jesus—and who could resist such an offer?? She led him into the streets of Calcutta and came upon a man who was dying—simply dying in the streets, and no one else seemed to even notice him. St. Teresa knelt down,

embraced this dying man in her arms, and told the bishop: “This is Jesus.” This was no mere pious talk on her part; she meant it literally because she knew what Jesus said: ‘whatever you do for the least of my brothers or sisters, you do for me.’

Am I saying that we all need to join a religious order or establish a new one to follow St. Teresa’s example? Of course not—we each have our own specific vocation in life based on God’s individual call to us and the particular gifts and talents he has given to each of us. But we all do share with her the vocation to love, to give ourselves freely and without partiality to others for their sake. As she said: “Do not think that love in order to be genuine has to be extraordinary...Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.” That is wonderfully practical advice. Do the things we can do for others—little, big, or anywhere in between—and do so for love of them, for their sake, because they are beloved children of God no less than we are. And let’s do so no matter how lovable or unlovable they may be:

- you students in school: is there someone in your class who always sits alone at the lunch table or often seems sad or alone? Maybe you can greet them with a smile and a friendly ‘hi’, or even ask if you could join them for lunch. You might be amazed at the difference that makes in that fellow student’s life (not to mention in your own attitude as well);
- you who are angry or frustrated with that politician or public official or CDC spokesman—or who are angry at those who oppose them—and who you are convinced are dangerously wrong about every issue: why not pray for those people? Pray for whatever grace of conversion they need as God sees that need. Pray because God desires their eternal salvation as much as he desires your eternal salvation. Prayer, after all, is an act of love. Someone once said: “My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors.” That was Jesus, of course—check out again his Sermon on the Mount.
- what about that relative or co-worker or whoever else that just keeps getting under your skin? Maybe that person is a real annoyance to you and maybe has even hurt you by something said or done. But that doesn’t excuse us from the call to love; we can acknowledge our hurts or annoyances, but we don’t have to be governed or enslaved by them. Pray for that person, show some act of kindness or share a kind word with them—whether they accept it or not. The call to love, Jesus’ command to love, was and is not given to us as an option or only if it would be well accepted and received by those to whom we offer it.

St. James reminds us: “show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” That is a key component of genuine holiness, of being a true disciple of Jesus. And St. Teresa reminds us that “Holiness is not something extraordinary...[it] is for every one of us as a simple duty—the acceptance of God with a smile, at all times, anywhere and everywhere.” And I might add: “...whether we always feel like it or not!”