

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

God loves you. Let me repeat that: God loves you. God, who is love itself, loves you. No matter who you are, or what you may have done, whatever sins or bad habits you may have, no matter what anyone else thinks of you, and even no matter who you have voted for: God loves you. And no matter what we do or who we are, nothing can change that. How do you feel when you hear these words? Hopefully they stir up something in you, especially a desire to respond to that love. Or perhaps these words have become so commonplace that they don't stir up anything, we feel indifferent to them, or maybe we're distracted right now thinking about the grocery list, or the to-do list, or some other list.

Regardless, one could say that this phrase – God loves you – is the foundational belief of our whole Catholic faith. One could meditate over and over on what this means, and on the implications of this little sentence. We could meditate on who this God is, and what his love for us is like, and how the fact that God loves each one of us should change us and how we live our lives. And everything we believe as Catholics grows out of this core belief, that God loves us.

This is where our faith should start; this is where every other teaching and doctrine of the Church comes from, and this should inform every aspect of our faith. One major implication of the phrase, “God loves you,” is that, at its heart, our faith is – or should be – a relationship with God: with God, the Creator of all things, with God, who is love itself. Without understanding this, we will inevitably misunderstand our faith. It is very likely that we will see our faith as mostly a set of rules and regulations. And there are I think two common ways of seeing the faith as just a collection of rules and regulations, both of which are of course incorrect. One of these ways is purely legalistic and transactional: I need to do this set of things, follow this set of rules, and then I will earn the prize of heaven. The other one is: the Church has invented a bunch of rules and regulations that are mostly if not entirely arbitrary, that are essentially meaningless and just a way for a group of men to oppress others and exert their power over them. The first one, the legalistic one, forgets that our faith begins with a relationship with God and that it is Jesus Christ who has earned heaven for us through his suffering and death on the Cross. And the second one, which dismisses the moral law of the Church as a bunch of “rules and regulations”, may remember that the faith

is at its heart about a loving relationship between God and each human being, but forgets that the whole of our faith – all of its teachings and doctrine – stem from the fact that God loves us.

In other words, all the teachings of the Church, including the so-called rules and regulations, are given to us by God because they are for our own good. The moral code of the Church is not arbitrary or unnecessary, but is rather for the purpose of our own human flourishing, both in this life, and in the next. God loves each one of us personally, and one of the implications of that is that this belief should change how we see ourselves, others, and the world, and it should likewise change how we live our lives.

Since the very beginnings of the Church, as I said last week, even going back to the part of Church history recorded in the New Testament, there have been conflicts and controversies. It has been said that in the first millennia of the Church's history, the conflicts primarily dealt with who God is; in the second millennia, they dealt with what is the Church; and now, really beginning in the previous century and continuing into this one, the conflicts deal with who is the human person, a big part of which is human sexuality.

Most of the present conflicts over Church doctrine now have to do with the human person. But I would venture to say that contained deeper within these conflicts over the human person are the old conflicts on the nature of God and the nature of the Church.

In any case, there are conflicts in the Church about Church teaching, these days especially related to the moral teachings of the Church. But again, our whole faith, including the moral teachings, are given by a loving God for our own good. But at times, they might not seem to be for our own good. They might seem to be too difficult to follow in the times in which we live. They might involve saying no to ourselves at times, denying ourselves, maybe even denying some things which we are really accustomed to, and maybe things that we don't even think are wrong. But then Jesus did say in today's Gospel: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Which strongly suggests that it is not necessarily going to be easy to follow Jesus! Yes, that sometimes it will feel difficult and burdensome, maybe not even fair. We might even wonder: why would you make it so difficult to follow you, Lord? It's said of St. Teresa of Avila, who founded numerous convents throughout Spain, on a particularly bad day,

grumbled to the Lord, “If following you is this hard, no wonder you have so few followers!” Whether she really said this or not, I don’t know, but I think there are times when many of us can understand the sentiment.

Following the Lord and His teachings as He has revealed them through His Church may not always be easy or pleasant. But it’s a bit like taking disgusting medicine. It tastes gross, but we know that it will benefit us. Or it’s like when you have to take a baby to the doctor to get a shot: the nurse pops in, administers the shot at lightning speed, and the child screams and cries. To the little baby, it makes absolutely no sense: I feel pain, I’m miserable, and that’s it. The little baby doesn’t understand that it’s so that he’ll be spared this or that illness later in life. So it is with us: the moral teachings of the Church can sometimes seem like bitter medicine, or they might not even make sense, but because God loves each one of us, they are for our own good – and the good of others.

That’s right, following God’s commandments don’t just benefit us, they benefit others. And conversely, when we don’t follow Him – when we sin – we hurt not only ourselves, but also others. Perhaps indirectly, but others will

still be affected. People often ask the question: if God loves us, then why do we suffer? Why would He let us suffer? God did not create suffering and pain; they are the consequences of sin. Sin introduces disorder into the order of God's creation, which He created good. We experience pain, suffering, and death because God gave us free will, and we are free to reject Him and His plan. Sin is like air pollution: even if we ourselves did nothing to add to the air pollution, everyone including ourselves is still affected by it.

As a Catholic priest, I am called to preach the fullness of the faith, the easy parts and the hard parts, the teachings that make us feel comfortable and those make us uncomfortable. It has been said that the role of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comforted. To put it another way: some people might think, "I'm basically a good person; I mean I've never killed anyone." Yes, that's good, but just not killing is a pretty low bar for what it means to be a good person. If a person thinks that he really doesn't have anything to repent of, nothing much to change, then I would say it's time to take a deeper look at oneself. Everyone has something – or many things – to work on. We all need God's grace and we are all in need of His mercy. But

fortunately He is not stingy with His grace and His mercy; He desires to give them to us.

On the other hand, some people struggle to believe that God loves them or forgives them. Perhaps they struggle with the same old sins over and over, and have for years. They think, “Why would God want to forgive me? I’m probably just going to eventually commit the same sins.” Or perhaps they have committed some pretty serious sins in their lives, and cannot imagine that God’s love and mercy would be great enough to forgive them. Or they wonder why God would even want someone like them with Him in heaven. Then I would remind them that God’s love for us is infinite; His love for us is not like our limited, human love; that because God is Love itself, there is no sin that is greater than God’s mercy. We have only to ask Him for forgiveness, have even a little sorrow for our sins and a desire to change, and we can be sure that He will forgive us. That is why Jesus died on the Cross. That is why the Lord gave us the sacrament of reconciliation. That is why the Lord gives us His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

So again, the role of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comforted. Unfortunately, those who are comfortable don't like to be afflicted. Giving someone correction, even under the best of circumstances, isn't easy. It will often come across as criticism; people can easily take it the wrong way and get offended. "Who are you to tell me what to do," etc., etc. This is where the prophet Jeremiah from our first reading comes in. Once again, as happened again and again throughout the Old Testament, the Jewish people had grown prosperous and comfortable, and had then forgotten about their need for God. So the Lord sent Jeremiah to remind them. And to warn them of coming doom if they did not repent and change their ways. And not surprisingly, Jeremiah was not very popular. He endured all kinds of mistreatment and suffering at the hands of his fellow Jews, especially of the Jewish leaders. No doubt they felt that he was being judgmental and harsh and unkind and unfair. But in reality Jeremiah was trying to help them.

There are some who want their priest to be a "Good-time Charley", someone who always gives positive, uplifting messages, who says the things they want to hear, who never challenges them. Priests often feel the temptation to be that person for their parish. What priest doesn't want to be

liked? But the faith I as a priest proclaim is not a faith of my own invention, nor is it a faith of the parish's invention, nor of a bishop, not even of the pope himself. Not even the pope has the right to change a constant teaching of the Church. Rather, the faith that I am called to preach is the Catholic faith that has been handed on from generation to generation, throughout the ages, the origin of which is Jesus Christ Himself. And sometimes we can be challenged by our faith. If that's the case, we ought to strive to open our hearts to understand our faith, not to try to make it conform to what we ourselves prefer or what we think makes the most sense to us personally. And certainly not to look at our faith through the lens of our politics. Rather, we should look at our politics through the lens of our faith, the faith of the Catholic Church, the teachings of Jesus Christ.

God is love. God loves each one of us. He gives Himself to us, and He desires that we give ourselves in return to Him. Let us always strive to repent of our sins, to be open to what the Lord desires to teach us, to live as He desires us to. Let us strive to take up our crosses and follow Him, to lose our life for His sake here on earth so that we might find it in heaven.

- **September 3, 2023 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**