

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Jesus Ranks Ahead of Us”

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I found this story in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*. Not that I am plugging the book, necessarily. It is just that sometimes the soul needs chicken soup. The story is entitled “Searching for a minister”. You may have heard this one before, but it is a good reminder. It begins...

“One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an official board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience. He'd just witnessed the Pastoral Relations Committee reject applicant after applicant for some minor fault - real or imagined. It was time for a bit of soul-searching on the part of the committee. So he stood up and read this letter purporting to be from another applicant.

‘Gentlemen: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also had some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been. I'm over 50 years of age and have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places, I have left town after my work caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrong doing. My health is not too good, though I still accomplish a great deal. The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities. I've not gotten along well with religious leaders in the towns where I have preached. In fact, some have threatened me, and even attacked me physically. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I have baptized. However, if you can use me, I promise to do my best for you.’

The board member turned to the committee and said, ‘Well, what do you think? Shall we call him?’ The good church folks were appalled! Consider a sickly, trouble-making, absent-minded ex-jailbird? Was the board member crazy? Who signed the application? Who had such colossal nerve? The board member eyed them all keenly before he replied, ‘It's signed, The Apostle Paul.’”

I love that story. We can be so hyper critical of the people in our lives. Our second reading to the Corinthians, a letter we will be journeying with for a number of Sundays, is very entertaining. It seems rather innocuous at first glance until you realize what St. Paul is doing. He begins his letter to the Corinthians by telling them he was called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. He says he is writing to the sanctified in Christ Jesus, to those called to be holy. Paul concludes his greeting by wishing them grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Why does he write this?

He writes this because, in fact, there wasn't peace in Corinth at all. As we will see next week when we continue Paul's letter, the Church of Christ in Corinth was separated into competing factions, one calling themselves the church of Kephas, another

the church of Paul, etc. Paul's response to the Corinthians next week will be, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" For St. Paul, ministry was not about "Paul" but about Jesus Christ! This is why he begins his letter with a focus on Jesus at every step of his greeting. Did you catch that? Every breath of his greeting mentions Jesus.

St. John the Baptist felt the same way. The Gospel of John reports that John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, a man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me...he will baptize with the Holy Spirit." It is Jesus who is the light to the nations, not the messenger. The light that comes from the messenger is like the light the moon reflects from the sun.

St. Paul understood this as well, but the Corinthians sure didn't. Confronted with the factionalism of the Corinthian church, Paul's answer to their dysfunction was the Eucharist. We see this vividly later on in first Corinthians chapter 11. The Eucharist was St. Paul's antidote to the Corinthian's problems. Now, what do a Eucharist people look like for Paul? Next chapter, 1 Corinthians 12: A Eucharistic people look like one body of Christ. What does being one body of Christ look like? Well, onto the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, a people who love! For St. Paul, when everything else is stripped away, only faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love.

And so, we could ask what would happen this week if we took up St. John the Baptist's invitation and allow Jesus to rank ahead of us, or as he puts it later on, to allow Jesus to increase in our lives and allow ourselves to decrease a bit? What would this look like? Would this invitation lead us to healthier and holy living? Would this invitation make a difference in my relationships at home, at work, or at school? Would this invitation make a difference in our society or our world, in how we interact with people of different races, cultures, or socio-economic statuses? What would it look like if I allowed my life to be less about me and more about Jesus?

The Catholic Church understands this too. Why do I believe this? I believe this because, about this time every Sunday the Church requires the priest to step away from this pulpit, to decrease so to speak, so that Jesus can increase becoming fully present to us in the Eucharist. It is good for a priest to be reminded now and again that the People of God are at Church first and foremost to receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. This is why, in my point of view, if we ever want to see transformation in our own personal lives, or in our Church, society or world, that journey can't begin with my ego. That journey begins with Jesus.