

8th Sunday of the Year (Cycle A)
(Isa 49:14-15; 1 Cor 4:1-5; Matt 6:24-34)

Recently I began reading a book about one of our leading political figures. He had expressed the conviction that, "For the most part, you can't respect people because most people aren't worthy of respect." A few weeks ago I had the privilege of being invited to Seton High School to discuss with the girls "How Can We Live the Call to Respect Others in a Tumultuous Society?" If the group I met with had held the conviction that most people aren't worthy of respect, the discussion would have been short indeed. As it was I asked them, in terms of the topic proposed, "Do you think our society is tumultuous?" They had no difficulty in agreeing to that. So I asked, "What makes it tumultuous?" and the answer came back, "There is so much hate!" I won't detail what direction the discussion went from there (you can perhaps guess), but I think that all of us can agree that there is much, too much hatred around us today.

Hatred is an ugly, distancing emotion; its definition suggests "an extreme aversion, especially with enmity or malice." The word appears often in the Bible, usually of those who hate God or the righteous, or, in the NT, those who hate Jesus or Christians. Jacob's sons hated Joseph; their hatred was fueled by envy. Their hatred led them to want to kill him; it did lead them to sell their brother into slavery.

Hatred is defensible ONLY when its object is something evil, as when God hates wrong doing, hypocrisy, falsehood, robbery and injustice; the Bible singles out as especially hateful the sin of oppression of the helpless.

How do we see hatred manifested most often today? Well, we see it toward those of a different color, manifested in the re-emergence of the KKK and the Alt-Right; we see it toward those of a different religion, as in the burning of synagogues, the shooting up of mosques; we see it in the attempt to exclude all people living in certain countries; and in the attempt to exclude all those from Mexico, in the desire to erect a wall against them (though our Holy Father Pope Francis said, "A person who thinks only about building walls, whoever they may be, and not building bridges is not Christian. This is not the Gospel"). It is very easy to demonize whole groups because of the crimes of a few of them--something done much too frequently.

We tend to think of the Book of Leviticus as too legalistic, but it is from Leviticus that we hear, "You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart." There also we read, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Love, of course, is the opposite of hatred; it is a beautiful, inclusive emotion. Everyone loves love. Valentine's Day, observed recently, is a celebration of the goodness and innocence of love. We could go through the Bible and list many

passages about love, but why should we when one passage says it all: "God is love." It's a statement that needs a lot of unpacking: what does it mean, "God is love"? We think of God the Father having His only begotten Son, whom He loves, leave the warmth, the bliss, the security of heaven, empty Himself of His divinity, in order to enter an unwelcoming world and allowed Him to offer Himself to die an agonizing death in order to redeem us.

And what does it mean for God, the almighty Creator of our vast universe, to die for mere creatures, for creatures who have shown themselves ungrateful and rebellious? Humanly speaking it makes no sense at all. What would a person in power, whether the Godfather or an earthly king, do to such subjects? He would deal with them in fury. God, however, sees our weakness, our misery, and treats us with compassion. After the flood, He promises never again to send destruction, because, He recognizes, "the desires of the human heart are evil from youth." What is needed is not annihilation but redemption and restoration. God is love.

In return, God expects us to treat each other as He has treated us. He says, "Love others as I have loved you," but because there is no way we can really understand God's love, He adds, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Could we hate ourselves, injure, short change, cheat, deceive, enslave ourselves? Of course not. And that's only the negative part. What about all the good things we would want for ourselves: security, love, peace, prosperity? We should also want the same for others. Amos reminded Israel of how God had dealt with them--that when they were enslaved in Egypt, God delivered them; when they were homeless, God drove out the mighty Canaanites and gave Israel their land. Now that their leaders are in a position of power, God expects them to treat the weak and poor as He had treated them. Instead they cheated, enslaved, oppressed the poor; therefore, Amos says, dreadful punishment awaited them.

If we are to love the neighbor, the question arises, "who is my neighbor?" When a Pharisee asked Jesus that, His response was the Parable of the Good Samaritan: the Samaritan was not a countryman, not a coreligionist. Leviticus gives a similar answer by adding to the commandment of love of neighbor the commandment to love the alien: "When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself."

The Bible tells us we must give preferential treatment not only to the poor, but to all who are vulnerable, among whom it lists the widow, the orphan, and the alien. In Psalm 146 we read that "The Lord protects the stranger,/ he sustains the orphan and the widow,/ but thwarts the way of the wicked" (Ps 146:9), and He expects us to do as He does.

God's will is to make love operative in all we do. The first, minimum step is

to respect each other. The one who says "most people aren't worthy of respect" is far from loving all; those who do not measure up to his understanding of "success" are "losers." When comes the great assize, many who were deemed losers will be revealed as winners; those who were judged as winners will be seen to be losers.

Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and this reminds us that hate can be a kind of leaven; it is contagious, corrupts everything it touches. To this Jesus opposes the good leaven of the gospel, a leaven of love--and love is more powerful than hate. If we cannot change our society overnight, we can at least be the good leaven that has power to bring about the change we all pray for, the change that is so badly needed.

In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, we read of "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue" standing before the throne and the Lamb." Unless we can accept all those others "from every nation, race, people, and tongue" as brothers and sisters, I don't think we would be comfortable--or even capable of--standing among that "great multitude, which no one can count before the throne and the Lamb."