

St. Augustine's, Croton-on-Hudson

October 23, 2005

23rd Sunday of Pentecost

The Rt. Rev. Mark S. Sisk

Good Morning.

It is a joy to be here. I am sorry that Karen could not be with us today as she often is, but I am very pleased that Canon and Mrs. Dietsche are here.

Though this is my first visit to St. Augustine's since returning to the Diocese as Bishop, I have known this parish for many years. I knew it best when I served as Archdeacon of Region II and David Wayne was your rector. Further I used to come to Croton-on-Hudson with some regularity when I studied at a Conservatory that was then just down the street in one of several failed attempts to learn to play the guitar.

I know, of course, that this is a time of great transition for you as you look for a new Rector. However, I have every confidence that you will make this evolution in your parish life without difficulty.

I am fully aware that your previous rector, David Carlson, left huge shoes to be filled. Like so many of you, I am an enormous fan of his. My only consolation in his leaving here is that he stayed within the Diocese.

You all may not know it but we brag on St. Augustine's all the time. You really are a wonderful model of what can happen to a parish when a solid priest works faithfully as a pastoral leader who develops the lay leadership. A vital congregation is the result, and you are a wonderful example of that effort.

As a sign of that vitality I understand that you are in the process of making two really concerted efforts: one to extend your out-reach (and especially through your response to the Hurricanes) and second you have decided to rely on your direct stewardship to support your annual budget. I think that that is right on target and just as it should be. In that very connection I want to express to you the gratitude of many for your support of the Diocesan budget and for all those among you who go the extra mile by contributing to the work of Episcopal Charities, as they, in turn, support the work of our congregations who serve the poorest in their respective communities.

And it is a special joy for me to be here with Betsy Rodman who is serving as your interim priest. This is one of the first times I get to visit a parish that is being led by one of the priests of the Diocese whom I have ordained.

So it is a pleasure to be here for many reasons.

One of the great joys of my work as Bishop of this wonderful Diocese is the opportunity it affords me to get out and about among the congregations and to convey, one to the other, greetings and thanks for all that you do in the Name of our Lord in this very particular and special place.

The fact is that there are more than two hundred congregations scattered across the more the 4,000 square miles of this Diocese in communities of all shapes and sizes. And in each we are doing ministry. And in each we share in each other's ministry. So an important part of my work is to share those thanks as broadly as I can.

Finally I want to congratulate those being confirmed this morning, and to welcome friends and family who may have joined them for this wonderful moment in their life in Christ.

If I were to recommend prayers for you to memorize today's collect would surely be among them.

Almighty God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

These few lines move us to the heart of what it means to be a person of prayer, the very heart of what it means to be a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All too often prayer is offered as though God needs our help to really see and understand what's going on. Usually that means getting God to see and do things our way. A great many prayers can sound as though God will miss the complexity of the matter, God just won't get it, unless we lay it all out in exquisite detail.

This misunderstanding of prayer is not the preserve of the naive. I remember with vivid clarity a moment in my own spiritual preparation for ordination. The Bishop (who will remain nameless – and was not of this Diocese) urged me to value the power of prayer. (A good thing to be sure.) However, to illustrate his point he told the story of the truly wondrous healing a mother of five. It seems that the whole town got together in prayer to explain to the all-knowing and eternal God of the Universe just how irreplaceable she was not only to her family but also to all of them as well. And so this heretofore ignorant God, or so the Bishop seemed to believe, changed His mind.

And of course in the Old Testament there are many famous instances of God having changed his mind if the person doing the praying was sufficiently persuasive. One thinks easily of Jonah and his famous pout under the bush precisely because God changed his mind by the about to be destroyed citizens of Nineveh.

As a matter of fact one of the principle methods of prayer in the ancient pagan world was the simple and repeated recitation of requests directed at the divine. Not surprisingly this pattern was also prominent in the prayer life of the ancient Hebrews as well. Scholars believe that it may have been this

practice which lays behind Jesus' words to his followers when, in teaching them the prayer that we know as the Lord's Prayer he began by saying,

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do: for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matt. 6:7,8)

The point of prayer therefore, is not to make God conform to us and to our needs, as though those needs were unknown to God. The point of prayer is to shape us, to conform us to ever more closely reflect the image of the Divine.

And, because of Jesus, never do we need to fear that that Divine Purpose will be anything but in our own best interests. This is so because not even we, at our most narcissistic selves, could love ourselves more than God already loves us.

Where does that then leave us, in terms of the practicality of life day to day? It would be easy to misinterpret this to mean that since God already knows all, and wills the best for us, and that we are left as no more than passive passengers riding on the Divine Will like feathers on a breeze.

However, by God's gracious goodness as revealed in Jesus, we are to be more than flotsam and jetsam on the grand tides of history. In Jesus we have been invited to join with God, to unite our wills to the Divine will in the salvation of the world.

When asked by the Pharisee what was the greatest commandment? In other words what is central to human existence, Jesus answered,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We are invited; we are given the opportunity to consciously and intentionally unite the purpose of our individual lives, with the purpose of all creation as held in the hands of God.

More than that: we are not left with some philosophical construct available only to those familiar with arcane learning, or to some vague generalities. God gives us, as Jesus so clearly explains and demonstrates, a regular and ordinary way to train our minds and hearts to will the divine will. And that is the second commandment, which Jesus says is like the first.

He says that we are given our neighbors in order that we might learn..."to love (them) as we love ourselves."

This gives us a hugely important benchmark. How do we know we love God: by how we love our neighbors. How do we strengthen our love of God: by

loving our neighbors. How do we grow more like God: by loving our neighbor. How do we grow to ever-greater conformity to the Divine: by greater love of neighbor.

Often the love of neighbor is not at all an easy thing to do. This is especially true when the category “neighbor” is expanded beyond a close and intimate circle of interdependent companions. When one’s neighbor is defined in a broader sense, love usually is far from the first natural impulse.

That is the challenge toward which our reading from Exodus points us when it reports that,

God said, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

In other words: God calls us to treat the alien in our midst with respect and dignity because we were all once aliens.

This, I am convinced, offers us a helpful way to assess our own fidelity to God’s call to us. Just how welcoming are we to the stranger among us? That is the standard. It is by doing the inner spiritual work, often preceded by the outer active work, that slowly our souls become conformed to the genuine love of neighbor that deeply unites us with the Will of God for us and for all Creation.

And because the God that we worship is in fact the God of all creation it is this very same standard: “the care of the alien among you,” will be the standard by which communities and nations will be judged. How close or how far are they from a correct ordering of their life inconformity with the deep ordering of Creation itself?

We have then in this second Commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”: a clear and objective standard, as well as a simple and useful guide as to how we are to conform our society and ourselves so that we, and the community of which we are a part can grow into a closer union with the beating heart of Creation.

It is into that closer union that those being confirmed and received this morning are committing and recommitting themselves. Let us join with them in that self-offering that together with them we may grow into a deeper union with each other and with God, today, tomorrow and unto the ages of ages.