

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - 2006 Year B - 1 Kgs 17:10-16; Mk 12:38-44

This past couple of weeks, amongst

- a. The ongoing battles over immigrants
 - b. The battle against AIDS
 - c. The rising death toll in Iraq
 - d. The rout of the Republican Party in the elections
 - e. The break-up of that once most faithful of couples-
 - i. No, not Mr. And Mrs. Brittany Spears
 - ii. But President Bush and his Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld
 - f. There was one news item that we might have missed
 - i. It was a report on an industry that has experienced phenomenal growth over the past few years. What is it?
 - ii. Hand sanitizers.
 - (1) Yes; water-less hand sanitizers have become big business, along with all the other antibacterial products sweeping the nation.
 - iii. People have become increasingly uncomfortable
 - (1) shaking hands
 - (2) kissing lips,
 - (3) holding on handrails and subway bars,
 - (4) and even using door knobs,
 - (5) For fear of disease.
2. You might be wondering why I list hand sanitizers
- a. with all the other issues that have filled our newspapers and TV screens,
 - i. not only this past week but for the last several years.
 - b. I do it because all of the issues that have plagued us, both literally and figuratively have something in common with the explosive growth of hand sanitizers.
 - i. and that is fear.
 - (1) Fear of contamination;
 - (a) be it through bio-terrorism or
 - (b) naturally occurring disease
 - (2) Fear of invasion
 - (a) by terrorists
 - (b) or by immigrants.
 - (3) Fear of everything; because of that fear
 - ii. We build walls to keep out foreigners
 - iii. We change laws to keep out immigrants
 - iv. We wage wars to kill terrorists
 - v. We buy sprays, soaps and sanitizers to kill germs.

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- (1) all of it meant to protect ourselves from whatever danger lurks out there in the world.
3. Now many of us, myself included tend to see this danger as a recent phenomenon, and look at the world before 9/11 as a world where this fear was largely absent.
 - a. But who are we kidding? Only ourselves.
 - i. This fear of contamination existed long before 9/11
 - ii. It existed before there bio terrorists or immigrants to worry about;
 - iii. It has been around even before we knew what bacteria were.
 - iv. It has been around as long as we have been.
 - b. Most scientists believe this fear is hard wired into us,
 - i. to protect “us” from “them”
 - (1) who bring with them their dangerous practices and new diseases.
 - c. We see it expressed in a positive way
 - i. anytime someone declares his or her faith in a religious community;
 - ii. When a Jew keeps kosher; a Christian is baptized, a Muslim declares Mohammed to be God’s prophet.
 - (1) At that moment the desire to distinguish us from them is experienced as commitment.
 - d. But that positive commitment turns into fear of contamination the moment
 - i. That a Jew sees a gentile as unclean because they do not keep kosher
 - ii. A Christian condemns a non Christian to hell
 - (1) because they are not baptized
 - iii. A Muslim wages violent jihad against the west
 - (1) because we dishonor Mohammed in editorial cartoons.
4. This fear of contamination is so deeply rooted that many despair of ever overcoming it.
5. But what would you do if you wanted to try?
 - a. You would remember a story about a widow who during a three year drought shared the last of her water and bread with a stranger named Elijah.
 - i. In the gospel of Luke Jesus recalled this story to the members of the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, and they tried to kill him; why?
 - ii. because Jesus pointed out what could not have been lost on the original author of First Kings.
 - (1) that the widow lived in Sidon and was not a Jew
 - (2) Yet because she did not treat Elijah as a “them”
 - (3) God blessed her with enough flour and oil to carry her and her son through the drought.
 - (4) And far more importantly, blessed her act of generous compassion.

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6. What else would you do?
 - a. You would point out that those people whose job it was to protect “us” from “them” really used their job for their own benefit.
 - i. In the gospel of Mark Jesus did this when he criticized the scribes, who were the keepers of God’s Law.
 - ii. That law which when followed was the fundamental expression of the love of Israel for their God.
 - iii. Yet the scribes used their position as the interpreters of the law, not to express their love of God, but, according to Jesus to line their pockets; and to gain the love of others. Thus for Jesus the masters of the Law did not understand the most basic thing about it.
 - b. But you would also notice a widow;
 - i. A widow who gave the last of her money to the support of the temple and thus to her God.
 - ii. Who really follows God’s Law? Jesus asks with this story and clearly says that because of her generosity the widow understands the Law and thus has more of a claim to be one of us than the scribes.
 - c. Given the way Jesus challenged the fear of the people in his society, it is little wonder that many came to see HIM as a source of dangerous contamination
 - d. and sought to kill him, and as we know they succeeded.
7. But suppose you wanted to try one last time to overcome the fear that turns the world into a armed camps of “Us” vs. “Them”. What would you do?
 - a. You would raise Jesus from the dead and say once and for all that God does not divide the world into us and them; not because the law and faith and religious commitment are not important; but because for God they do not divide;
 - i. that a follower of God’s law can be found among us as well as them;
 - ii. that all people are capable of the generous love that lies at the heart of Jesus’ message;
 - iii. and thus all of them are at least implicitly, part of us.
8. That might sound radical; it is but it is radical in the most basic meaning of the word; radical - from the Latin *Radix* meaning **root**;
 - a. to be radical originally meant to get to the root of things;
 - i. and thus to see the thing from which everything else grows
(1) and thus the thing that unites us all.
 - b. When we see this, we see why the church, when it is following its best lights,
 - i. finds itself in opposition to so much of what happens in our world;
 - ii. for so much of it is based on fear.

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- c. we see why the church when it is following its best lights,
 - i. protects immigrants; defends the rights of minorities and works to promote a healthy respect for all human life.
 - d. And we also see the many times when we do not do these things for what they truly are; they are failures, or to use church language, sins.
9. So I would like to suggest that even as we use our hand sanitizers and antibacterial sprays to protect us from the contamination of this world;
- a. If we want to begin to build a community which is not only protected but **immunized** against the fear that threatens to tear us apart, use what Jesus used. Use generosity. Use love. Use forgiveness and then you will see the truth that Elijah preached and Jesus died for.
10. That to be a Catholic is to be RADICAL;
- a. for Catholic faith is UNIVERSAL faith
 - i. in that it is faith in the one who
 - (1) in his words,
 - (2) by his actions
 - (3) and with his life
 - (a) sought to overcome the fear of contamination which threatens to divide and destroy us,
 - (b) not by destroying them,
 - (i) but by proclaiming that for God there is no them, only us.