

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Churches are funny places. You know that by now. I always love a good story about funny things that happen in church. Some of them you couldn't make up.

In a certain church, almost as soon as the congregation sat down and the priest began to preach, a gentleman on the front row fell promptly asleep and began to snore. The priest continued his homily and as the fellow snored louder, the priest raised his voice. After about fifteen minutes, the priest was literally shouting and the snoring got louder and louder. Frustrated, the priest said to the man's wife, seated next to him, "Would you please wake him up?" Embarrassed to death, but standing by her man, the woman said, "You put him to sleep! You wake him up!"

Then, there was the Women's Sodality that had raised \$10,000.00 for their parish. The leader of the Sodality announced the gift to the congregation and then asked the members of the Sodality to march to the altar to present their donation to the pastor. A group of women, mostly 55 and older stood, formed a line in the center aisle, and proceeded to march to the altar. The organist took it upon himself to provide a marching tune to encourage the ladies. She started playing a children's chorus, titled, "The Lord's Army". If you're not familiar with the words of the song, they go like this, "I may never march in the infantry, ride in the cavalry, shoot the artillery..." But they weren't the words that were in the mind of the congregation because the original words of the song were, "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be; ain't what she used to be; ain't what she used to be..."

When the choir started singing those words, the organist realized what he had done; saw the daggers in the eyes of the Sodality members, and fled from the church for his life.

Funny things happen in churches all the time. But we can never forget that all of Jesus' plans for the world are centered in the church.

Our reading in today's Gospel is words of Jesus directed at the church. It reflects who we are. We are the people who follow Jesus. We don't simply believe in Jesus. We don't simply worship Jesus. If we are truly the church of Jesus Christ, we try to live our lives following his example and his teachings as God gives us the grace to do so.

It's like a group of hikers who decided to climb up a steep mountain. The first few hours of the hike were relatively easy and the hikers talked and laughed, enjoying each other's company. But as they got closer to the top, the path became more treacherous. They no longer walked in groups. Now they walked single file. Darkness fell as they were coming closer to the peak. The leader stopped them and said, "Now, follow my feet. Do not venture to your right."

After he had said this, he reached into his pocket, retrieved a stone and asked for silence. He dropped the stone off the right side of the trail...and they waited and waited and waited, until finally they heard the sound for the stone echo off the ground, thousands of feet below. From then on there was no question about everyone following close behind the leader, step by step by step. It was a long difficult journey following the leader all through that night, but when they got to the top of the mountain, they came into the glory of the rising sun.

That's what it's like in following Jesus. The path is often treacherous, but in staying close to him, we are assured of entering into His glory.

Today's Gospel text is found in John's account of the Last Supper. Jesus had just washed the feet of the disciples, giving them the example of how they were to love by serving; broken the bread and blessed the wine, giving it to them as His Body and Blood, given for them, as an example of how sacrificial love really is. Judas gets up and scurries away to do his evil deed. It is then that Jesus addresses the remaining disciples, big tough men all, (and us) as "My children". What a beautiful term of endearment Jesus uses to convey his love for them (and us). "My Children!"

Then he says, in his absence: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another: This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Just like those hikers who survived the treacherous climb up the mountain by staying close to their leader and following in his steps, the disciples would survive, and we will survive, by obeying this commandment and following his example of love.

Now, this command to love, in and of itself, wasn't really a new commandment. In Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18, we are taught the principle of loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus had even taught them to love their enemies. To love your neighbor as you love yourself is what we call The Golden Rule, and variations of it are practiced by people all over the world to one degree or another.

Of course, there are some who don't subscribe to it or find it too difficult. When D.H. Lawrence, one of the most noted author, poet, and literary critic of the 20th century first read a collection of Ernest Hemingway's short stories, he said that they all ended up in the same place. He said the message Hemingway was conveying was this: Don't ever get too attached to anyone! Don't ever commit yourself to another person! Never get caught in that trap!

Apparently, that's how Hemingway lived his life. In fact, he once fired a babysitter because his sons were starting to care for her too much. He told his sons, "Don't get too attached to anyone! Perhaps it was this lack of attachment to anyone; this choosing not to commit to another, that led Hemingway to take his own life.

God did not make us that way! We are not designed to live detached from others. Jesus recognizing this, offers us a new commandment. What's new in it is not to simply love others as we love ourselves, but we are to love as Christ showed us how to love—unconditionally and sacrificially—loving even those, maybe especially those, who can't or won't love you back. This is a new kind of love. This command, Jesus directs to the church. We are to love one another as he loves us. This is how the world will know that we follow Jesus—because we love one another.

I never heard of him before, but there is a singer/songwriter named Ken Medema. I am told he is almost totally blind, but is a man of great spiritual vision. Some years ago, he wrote this song, directed at the church:

If this is not the place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?

If this is not the place where my spirit can take wing, where do I go to fly?

If this is not the place where my questions can be asked, where do I go to seek?

If this is not the place where my feelings can be heard, where do I go to speak?

If this is not the place where you accept me just as I am, where do I go to be free?

If this is not the place where I can try and grow and love, where do I go to be just me?

I guess I have to ask, “Is our church that kind of place?”

As I pondered the question, honestly, I have to answer, “Sometimes...and sometimes not!”

For instance, yesterday, as we celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation in this place, you could feel the love. It was palpable! It was tangible! It was real!

But, then, there was a well-known pastor preaching on Jesus’ teaching to “love your enemies”. He said, “I don’t think I have any enemies...outside the church.” He was speaking a hard truth. Sometimes church people don’t reflect unconditional, sacrificial love even toward one another. No wonder people outside the church call us “hypocrites” when they don’t see us or hear us loving one another unconditionally and sacrificially, as Christ loves us.

As I was writing the funny story of the Women's Sodality with which I began this homily, I couldn't help but remember back to the time when our parish had a Women's Sodality, when I first arrived 23 years ago. The Sodality, like the one in the story, was primarily a fund-raising organization, and their primary way to raise funds was to charge \$6.00 per person for a funeral luncheon.

Now, I had just come from an African-American parish in the poorest neighborhood in North Philadelphia. There, when there was a death in a family, the members gathered together, providing covered-dishes, and served the family with great love.

So, I was really upset when I found the Sodality was charging people and I said, "No, we can't charge. We need to provide for each other in time of trouble. That's what it means to be church." Man, was I in trouble! It wasn't long before the President of the Sodality presented me with a check for \$10,000.00 which represented all the money they had raised in the past year, but she said to me, "That's the last penny you'll get from us. We won't raise another dime for this parish". Others huffed, "Hmm! He's bringing all that Black stuff into our parish!"

Some of the women took their families and left the parish. A few continued as volunteers, and quite a few lost loved ones, for whom we provided luncheons, and eventually came around, and started helping again. And then there were those who died themselves, and guess who got the last word? And then there are still a few who look at me as if I have dog dirt on my shoes.

But, what has happened over these past 20 some years as a result of providing this kind of love in our parish? And I have not made it easy. I have insisted that we had to put table clothes on the tables and use dishes and silverware, not paper and plastic, and treat the people we serve as we would our own families. Time and time again, funeral after funeral, people are amazed at what we do for each other. They can't believe that we do it for everyone at no charge. We have served crowds from fifty to five hundred, and we have never run out of food to serve or people willing to serve. It is the most evangelizing thing that we do. Year after year, we have gained new members because they had been to one of our funeral luncheons.

So, yes, even for me, climbing that mountain, following in the footsteps of our Leader, it is sometimes treacherous. I had to endure the anger, the bad-mouthing, and even being shunned by some. But, it was worth it and it is worth it, because God is being glorified in us.

It is us, the church, to whom Jesus speaks today, "My children...I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another; this is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."