

Sunday, November 4, 2012 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Father Michael Snyder, MM, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Psalms 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 57; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

When asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus replied: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Mark 12: 29-31).

It was one of the scribes, marveling at how Jesus could hold his own in a discussion with intellectuals, who addressed this question to him. And Jesus, as a faithful Jew, quotes the Shema, the traditional prayer of Moses from the book of Deuteronomy, our first reading for today.

Last week we heard of the faith of the blind man, Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside begging. He hears that Jesus is passing and he believes that Jesus can and will help him. And, because of his faith, Bartimaeus is healed. The story was so remarkable that his name is one of the few among those healed that is preserved in the gospels to remind us of the meaning of faith. But in today’s gospel Jesus teaches us that more is required. In addition to faith, we must have love. He says love God with all that you have: your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength. But I ask myself, we can’t touch and we can’t see God, so how does one love God?

Jesus gives us a big hint: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

I worked in Tanzania, East Africa for 26 years. Christianity is thriving in Africa with hundreds of thousands entering our churches each year. They are attracted to the life and teachings of Jesus. Like themselves, he was not a stranger to suffering and he was not afraid to love others. Time and again, we hear he is tired and wants to go off across the lake, or into the desert, or up a mountain to pray and re-charge his batteries. But, then he finds people along the way, the Bartimaeuses of the world, and he helps them from a simple motive of love.

When you realize what Jesus is asking us to do, to love God by loving others with all that you have, you discover that the Christian life is not an easy one. G.K. Chesterton, a famous British author of the 20th century and a convert to Catholicism, once wrote: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” The Christian life is a difficult one; to love one’s neighbor as oneself is not easy!

My most recent assignment in Africa was as chaplain at Muhimbili University, the national medical university of Tanzania. The students, the intelligentsia of the country, always fascinated me. Let me share one story with you:

After a full day at the university and hospital in Dar es Salaam, I returned home in the evening to prepare my evening meal. As it was cooking I was settling down to watch the news when I received a text message from Donald, a fifth year medical student. There was a patient in his ward who needed to speak with me. One minute later, a second message came stating she needs to see you now! This usually means that a person is in danger of death. So, I ran to get dressed, gather my missal and oils, and off I went to the hospital.

Upon entering the ward I met four medical students, all on rotations as part of their studies. They greeted me enthusiastically and knew why I had come. They introduced me to the patient who was tucked in bed under a mosquito net. Her name was Patricia. I was a bit surprised, as Patricia did not seem to be in critical condition. She was conscious and had no

evidence of pain. In speaking with her she said that she has cancer. Thinking that she was critical I did not come with Communion, but asked if she wished to receive the sacrament of the sick. She replied: "No! I need to speak with you and to ask for prayers." Patricia said that she is married, but the marriage was a civil one only. Her husband, a non-Catholic, did not want to get married in the Catholic church. She asked if she was in error for having married him. I replied that the church wishes all of its faithful who live in committed relationship to receive the sacrament of marriage.

She continued: "Even though I am sick, if my husband agrees now to get married in the church, would it be possible?" I told her that the two of them were already married, but yes, the marriage can be blessed by the church and she can receive the sacrament. This would be easy to do. She seemed so relieved and said that was all she needed to talk to me about. We then shared some prayers, I blessed her, and off I went to finish cooking my evening meal. On the way out of the ward I was greeted by more of my students all taking care of the sick while also studying the nature of their illnesses.

I asked myself: why did Donald contact me at night, telling me that I needed to come to the hospital right away? Certainly I could have visited Patricia during the day time hours; there was no emergency. First I chalked it up to the fact that Donald is a student, still learning the ropes. Then, I realized something else.

Whenever I preach at Mass, teach in a seminar, or speak at a meeting, I always explain to the students that they need to treat patients physically and spiritually. They need to look at the whole person, not just the specific illness. That night, Donald, in his final year as a medical student, visited Patricia, knowing she was a cancer patient. He spoke with her and learned that she was also bothered deeply by her marriage situation. Few doctors would have asked or cared about this. Donald and his classmates were simply following my guidance by taking the time to look at patients not just as objects to be cured, but as people, their brothers and sisters, who are in need of healing on various levels. Knowing that he could not answer any questions about marriage, but knowing how it was affecting Patricia as she dealt with the revelation that she is sick with cancer, Donald called me.

It was an emergency – Patricia needed spiritual healing. She needed the assurance that her marriage can be healed in the church's eye. With that she was ready to face the physical challenges of dealing with cancer. Originally, a bit put off for leaving my dinner preparations and a peaceful evening, I was so grateful to witness the faith and love of our medical students. They will make fine Catholic doctors in the near future as they venture throughout this developing country of Tanzania seeking to bring healing to the thousands who await them.

If you want to love God, then love your neighbor as much as you love yourself, "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Day by day we travel through life hopefully discovering the meaning of this commandment. I learned more about it from medical students in Tanzania. I went to teach them and in the process they taught me.

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200 New York Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20001

202-832-1780 ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org