

January 27, 2019
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

"Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing"

*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, and your neighbor as yourself*

Church historian, Diana Butler Bass, writes what it meant to follow Jesus in early Christianity. "Throughout the first five centuries people understood Christianity primarily as a way of life in the present, not as a doctrinal system or promise of future eternal salvation. Jesus's teachings changed and improved the lives of its adherents and served as a practical spiritual pathway. It bettered existence for countless ancient believers, which accounts for the rapid spread of Jesus' Way through the near east after Jesus' death. The earliest Christians were called 'the People of the Way'.

"Christian defenders, such as Justin Martyr (ca. 165) in his work, 'First Apology,' chapter 14, taught that Jesus's way mended lives: *'We who formerly . . . valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies.'*

"People back then could see that the Way of Jesus brought diverse peoples together, transforming them, giving even women, peasants, and slaves a way to reorder their lives. And what was that way? Mark 12:28-34, *'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, and your neighbor as yourself.'* This, according to Jesus, is the way of the Kingdom of God and the path into it."

Today, is this scripture passage being fulfilled in our hearing?

In many quarters today, Christian communities are once again embracing the ancient insight that the faith is a spiritual pathway, a life built on love rather than doctrinal belief. For instance, the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, you might ask, after all we've heard about the abuses of the church and all its infighting?

You're sitting there - looking at me... probably wondering how I can say the Catholic Church is moving on a spiritual pathway based on love rather than doctrinal belief. I have to say, in spite of myself, I believe that is precisely what is happening, that the Church is being moved on a spiritual pathway that is built on love and not on belief, as she has for so many centuries.

This came to me through something I read in the current issue of "A Matter of Spirit," that was written by Jesuit Father Walter Burghardt called: "Why I am still in the Church." It reads: "In the course of a half century I have seen more Christian corruption than you have read of. I

have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself. And yet, I love this church, this living, pulsing, sinning people of God with a crucifying passion. Why?

For all the Christian hate, I experience here a community of love.
For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of reason.
For all the individual repressions, I breathe here an air of freedom.
For all the fear of sex, I discover here the redemption of my body.
In an age so inhuman, I touch here tears of compassion.
In a world so grim and humorless, I share here rich joy and earthy laughter.
In the midst of death, I hear an incomparable stress on life.
For all the apparent absence of God, I sense here the real presence of Christ.

The commentary on this prayer reads, "What the Catholic Church needs to move forward from this current moment of crisis is people who are not blind to its brokenness, but who are passionate for its mission, as expressed in the prayer we just heard." This is about us.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

Who is our neighbor? The Church, including the institutional Church, is our neighbor. We are to love this neighbor as ourselves and feel passionate for her well-being. Yes, I'm talking about the hierarchy too. If we long to see reform and renewal in the Church, we will not see it as long as we simply criticize and complain about her weaknesses and failures, because in doing so, we are simply criticizing and complaining about our own.

Fr. Richard Rohr says *"There is one necessary starting point for any spiritual growth and renewal, whether it is in ourselves or in our Church, and that is the experience of powerlessness, of letting go of our self-serving certainties, attachments, and status quo's. Renewal is possible only after we have been shaken out of our everyday unhealthy patterns and allow our inner compass to spin and direct us to a new reference point where we discover God working in our lives and in the life of the Church."*

This is happening to our Church today, isn't it - finding our self-serving certainties, attachments and status quo's being overturned - finding our view of the Church and her clergy being shaken. Our old reference points have changed, and the old guideposts no longer reveal what it means to be Catholic.

Our inner spiritual compass is pointing in a new direction, a new way in which God is at work among us. What that new way of being Church is we do not yet fully understand, but it has something to do with what the 13th century Persian mystical Muslim prophet, Rumi, says, *"Our task is not to find God, but to remove the barriers we put up against him."* When we remove the barriers against love we have put up against the church - and ourselves, we will begin to experience God at work in our lives, including in the darkest moments, and actually find

ourselves loving this Church, this living, pulsing, sinning people of God with a crucifying passion.

For all its Christian hate, we experience here a community of love.
For all its institutional idiocy, we find here a tradition of reason.
For all its individual repressions, we breathe here an air of freedom.
For all its fear of sex, we discover here the redemption of our bodies.
In an age so inhuman, we touch in her tears of compassion.
In a world so grim and humorless, we share in her joy and laughter.
In the midst of death, we hear in her an incomparable stress on life.
For all the apparent absence of God, we sense in her the real presence of Christ.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

Is this scripture passage being fulfilled today in our hearing?