

"God's Questions - How Do I Respond?"

Homily of August 18, 2002 (*Matthew 15, 21-28*)

by Sister Carol Zihn

Good Morning! I am delighted to be here. This is a wonderful parish, just wonderful. I'm a very good friend of Sister Pat Kozak. Do you know Pat? I will see her next week, and I have a whole list of people who said "Hello" to her. So, I can see why she loved it here so much. I am very grateful to Father Brian for his gracious welcome, and for your gracious welcome and hospitality.

You know, when I looked at the parish bulletin and saw my picture, and then I looked at last week's bulletin and saw poor Father Frank McNulty's picture, I thought maybe the Holy Spirit did inspire me to choose this same outfit as is in the picture, what I have on today, so in case my picture didn't turn out, you would still recognize me from the bulletin.

You know there is a story told of a first grade sister (This is one of my favorite stories) and, you know, when I went to school, as perhaps with some of you, there was a certain pew, right next to Sister, that was reserved for all the special children of God that she wanted to keep close to her. Well, the story is told that, one of these children, Tommy, escaped, and he was seated up front. And the whole school was taken to the opening Mass and, unlike in this parish (because you have wonderful homilists here) the homilist was just going on and on and on. And every time that Sister and Tommy caught one another's eye, because Tommy was having his own homily in the front pew, Sister would go like this (beckoning him to her, with her index finger) and every single time Tommy went like this (beckoning away from himself, with his index finger). So, about forty minutes into the homily, with no sign of stopping, now Sister's whole arm is very tense and every time Tommy saw her, he went like this (index finger beckoning away from himself) right from the front pew, one hour into the homily. Oh, yes.... yes.... That doesn't happen here.... Does it?no.... In another Church.... One hour into the homily, now Sister's whole body has all the tension in it and she is going like this (beckoning him to her, with index finger) . And Tommy, of course, is now standing up on the pew, facing everybody and Tommy goes like this (beckoning away from himself, with index finger). Well, thanks be to God, the Holy Spirit finally moved the presider to finish the liturgy. The children got dismissed from Church, and, as soon as Sister went out into the corridor, she got ahold of Tommy and she said, "Thomas, do you not know that when I go like this, it means that I want you to come here to me right this minute?!" And he said, "Yes, Sister. And do you know that when I go like this, it means I don't want to?"

I don't know about you, but when I looked at the Scriptures today and tried to remember what our Church, whom we love, asks us to do on any Sunday, which is to

look at the Sunday before and the Sunday after to see where we are today.... When I looked at last week's gospel, from those who heard Matthew, it was that wonderful story about Peter who walked on the water, as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, and he was met with an incredible question, wasn't he, when Jesus said to him, "Why did you doubt, Oh you of little faith?"

Next week, we are going to meet Peter again, in the continuation of the story as told to those who heard Matthew, when Jesus asks him the incredible question, "Who do you say that I am?" And so where we are today is between those two questions. What is it that enables us to be of great faith, even when we doubt, and what answer do we give in our lives to the question that comes to us, "Who do you say that I am?" How to get from here to here, I think, is presented to us in today's scriptures.

You know, surely there are questions before us today. Aren't there? Questions from the larger world, if you will.... questions maybe something like this.... How come they can't seem to quite take care of the poverty problem when it is so simple. Some people just have to do with less and share the bounty with a whole lot of others. Or maybe this question.... How come they kill so many people in the name of a race, a religion, or even such inspiring sets of values as freedom and democracy, when it is really so incredible to learn to understand one another and appreciate all that diversity? Or perhaps, the most compelling question: how come they continue to do environmental destruction when they already know that the human species is going to be the one that suffers the most, when there are already thousands of forms of social life that are environmentally friendly? How come? How come? How come?

I think that is part of what happened to Jesus in this morning's gospel, and what happened to Him, I think, is what helps us get from last week's question (Oh, you of little faith, why did you doubt?) to next week's question (Who do you say that I am?) Because what happened to Jesus today is three things that I would like to share, and I have some props. Good teachers always have props. Here are my props (holding up two different inflated globes of the world). We are going to talk about these a little bit more tomorrow night. But, in case you don't come tomorrow night, then at least you will see them. OK?

These are two of what we call "world views." They are two ways of seeing the world. We are going to look, tomorrow night, at each one of these world views and see how our faith informs each way of seeing the world. But you know, if you look at this world view (a transparent globe with clearly defined separate countries, continents and oceans), which is a pretty common one, (We are pretty used to seeing this one.) there is a particular way of understanding the world, if these are the glasses that you wear. We've only had this world view (the other globe, a "from Space view, showing continuous oceans blended with continents) since 1969, when the astronauts went far enough away to actually see, what they said when they came back. They said things

like, "We saw one single sacred community of life;" and that beautiful quote, "....A beautiful blue marble floating in black space!" World views are powerful tools!

And I think the first thing that happened to Jesus today is He had His world view challenged. What He did in this gospel, I think, is what invites me, and hopefully some of us, to do. Because the way He saw the world in today's gospel was really not a world view, but a set of assumptions. He had become used to, as the story tells us, who should hear the faith and who shouldn't, who should be "in" and who should not. And this woman didn't fit into that set of assumptions. And what happened to Jesus is, I think, what needs to happen to me and perhaps some of you, and is to ask the question in order to answer the two gospel questions of last week and next week. I think the first powerful question for us is "Do I operate in my life and in my relationships out of a set of assumptions, like horse-blinders? Or do I allow my faith and life to kind of challenge my world-view?"

The second thing that happened to Jesus, I think, is the whole struggle about questions and answers. You noticed, didn't you, that the woman doesn't ask Jesus any questions. She makes statements to Him, and yet those statements to Him seemed to have worked on His mind and heart by raising questions in Him. I think that's a challenge for us today. I don't know about you but the folks that I live and work with in the north and the west, mostly, we have this addiction, I think, to answers. We want them quick, fast, clean, and efficient. And perhaps, what happened to Jesus is what needs to happen to us, that answers are good (We are not saying that they are not good.) but what's more powerful is to learn to ask the right question.

And, finally, I think the third thing that happened to Jesus was His whole movement from what's referred to as "from arrogance to vulnerability." (Now we don't usually perceive Jesus as being arrogant!) But you know the scientific definition of "vulnerable" is very, very powerful for me. Do you know that the scientists are telling us that not one of the three hundred million species that are alive on this planet, not one species, lives alone? If they live alone, they die. That's what vulnerability is, the ability to take in all of life, receive it, let it kind of work on us, (That's how we understand grace.) so it transforms us for more life. Arrogance is when you spray yourself with teflon, and you only let in what you want. I think we saw Jesus today kind of shift from being sprayed with teflon, if we can use that image, to this position of vulnerability, to allow this woman and her great faith 'Cause isn't that what He finally says to her? "Oh woman of great faith, let it be done to you as you wish!"

And so, perhaps, in those questions that we ask about poverty, about all the violence that is going on in our world, and certainly about the environment.... If those questions do to you what they do to me, which is I want to be like Tommy, or Thomasina, I want to say, "I don't think so, God. I don't think I want to visit those kinds of questions.

Thank you very much," then maybe what Ignatius wrote a couple hundred years ago is really true. Ignatius said that when you feel yourself resisting, which is what this is ("I don't want to!"), the resistance is the edge to growth. And so, perhaps, the answer for how do we live between "Why did you doubt, Oh you of little faith?" into the answer of next week, ("Who do you say that I am?"), how we live from those questions is perhaps in the gospel today, seeing Jesus shift His world view, struggle with questions, and be vulnerable. Perhaps resistance really is the edge to growth.