

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC
June 28, 2020, Streaming Mass
13th Sunday of Year A Mt 10:34-1:1

In this morning's gospel we hear Jesus say, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." We don't usually expect Jesus to speak in this manner. Here He sounds somewhat like Kim Jong Un, fearless leader of North Korea, or like the head of some religious cult. In the gospels, Jesus never preached Himself--He was not the focus of His message; He was always about the task of announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom has an expansive quality about it, rather than the narrow one that seems to describe this morning's passage. The Kingdom of God is, or will be, that state of human affairs when human beings recognize a loving God as the core value of human existence, and then go on to live in light of that, treating each other as brothers and sisters—a rather high and noble aspiration but one which nonetheless we try to make real, as best we can. So, why is Jesus speaking the way that He does?

Jesus is taking the family unit, the essential building block for a healthy society, saying that even this most important human institution cannot be a law unto itself, should not be so turned in on itself that it ends up taking care of just its own needs. Even the family can be critiqued if it becomes so self-serving that it neglects its opportunities to be of service to a wider community. Even the family has to be open to hear the voice of Him who announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. What Jesus is doing here is calling us to renounce all our narrow, tribal loyalties—from the smallest to the largest—for an allegiance to that which is broad enough to encompass all peoples, viz., the Kingdom of God. We have to broaden our definition of “family” to embrace those who are not of the same blood, ethnicity, or race, but who are children of the One God. It is an invitation to be inclusive, rather than exclusive.

Too often the narrowness of our allegiances leads us to adopt a defensive posture. When we feel the interests of our group are being threatened, we are quick to “circle the wagons,” in the style of the pioneers on the Western frontier when they were attacked. We quickly know who's with us and who's agin' us, but it doesn't stop there. Our group has to feel morally superior to the enemy; so we say they can't be trusted; they don't have the same values as do we. Or, maybe, in less life-threatening situations, they are just said to be dirty, or lazy or dumb. But the decisive moment occurs when members of a group feel they are somehow “victims,” that the deck is stacked against them, and that they are not being treated fairly. That's the crucial

moment because “victims” often feel they can now make up their own rules, that their threatened status lets them decide what’s right and wrong. This, of course, in the extreme is the logic of the terrorist. Innocents can be killed in a righteous cause, for in the minds of the aggrieved “victims,” there are no innocents. All incur guilt simply by being “one of them.” The interests of the small group are made to reign supreme over any other.

We don’t have to look to the newspaper headlines to see groups closed in on themselves. I remember years ago going to public school board meetings and hearing parents make all sorts of charges, accusations and innuendos against individuals with whose policies they disagreed. They acted as if the defense of their little ones permitted them to say whatever they felt like to accomplish their purposes, regardless of the savagery or untruth of their remarks. I’ve seen Catholic parishes where parents of parochial school and parents of public school kids were pitted against each other, warring over the use of an athletic field or gymnasium. Within families, we’ve all seen parents whose permissiveness and blindness lead them to believe that their children can do no wrong, or parents whose clannishness may be such that when their children marry, they refuse to let them go, emotionally, but are always being critical of their in-laws, always interfering to “protect” the rights of their son or daughter in their new family.

The narrowness of our allegiances is best demonstrated in our national politics, wherein party over country seems to be the order of the day. At no time since just before the Civil War has our nation been so divided. Recent surveys have shown that both on the left and the right parents strongly opposed to one of their children marrying a member of the opposite political party. The pursuit of a common good has given way to a partisan agenda wherein neither side is able, or even willing, to work with the other. It should be obvious that radical self-interest cannot be the foundation of a platform to build a policy for the benefit of all, but that does not deter our political leaders. The question is how long can things go on this way before the situation implodes?

Over and over again the same pattern repeats itself. It is the tendency for groups from the smallest to the largest to close in on themselves; to become a law unto themselves, when they believe their interests are being threatened; and to destroy others, sometimes even themselves, in a siege mentality that prevents them from hearing the truth that would rescue them from their own paranoia. This is not to deny that disagreements and disputes always exist between people, but that the ability to see just one’s own side, one’s own point of view, is the path to destruction. It is the morality of the tribe that dominates at the exclusion of the rights of others.

Let us pray that we can commit ourselves to the message Jesus gives us in His preaching of the coming of God's Kingdom, that we can move beyond our tribal loyalties, striving to achieve the common good, with God as our Father and all human beings as potential brothers and sisters.