

Sermon Proper 18 A
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2011

Usually when I know I have to write a sermon, I read the lessons, read some commentaries on the lessons, read the lessons, study some reference books on the lessons, read the lessons, and then I just sit down at the computer and out it comes. I attribute this to the presence of the Holy Spirit and the fact that I have done my home work so I will be able to understand just what the Holy Spirit is talking about. But, writing a sermon on this gospel lesson today was very difficult for me. I struggled with it. I wrote several pages, then deleted them...rewrote them and deleted them. I was actually contemplating preaching one of the other lessons, and then, after talking with my husband about this, I realized why I was having so much trouble with this gospel.

I really love the church. It has such a big part of my heart. It has played such a big part in my life. Being in the church community has helped me so many times, in so many ways, and I just hated to admit that it isn't always as nice or kind, or perfect, as I would like to believe. Jesus knew this....he was fully human as well as fully God, so he knew human nature.

That's why in the gospel today he gives us the way that problems should be handled in the church community.

Most of us join a church naively believing that everyone in that community is always caring, compassionate, fair, just, loving and non-confrontational....better than those other people out there in the world that are greedy, mean and self serving. But, sadly, that's just not true. It wasn't true in the very first churches and as much as it pains me to say it, it's not true now either...such a tragedy.

I have known many "walking wounded" from church fights. Disagreement on committees that have led to one or the other leaving a parish; disillusionment about change leading to division and separations from the church; couples divorcing, fighting over which one stays and which one has to find a new church. And, one young woman in particular comes to mind. She truly believed she was called to the priesthood. She had a very successful career, that she very much enjoyed, with a six-figure salary, and so she tried to ignore this call as long as she could. When she finally gave into God's insistence, she entered the ordination exploration process with the full support of her parish priest and her parish lay exploration

committee. As she was finishing phase I of the process, the psychological phase, and before she was assigned to an internship in an exploration parish, Phase II, her best friend was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. As you would expect, she was deeply saddened by this. She went to her parish priest and asked if the parish could conduct a healing service for her friend, who was also a member of her parish. Her priest told her that he was sorry, but that wouldn't be possible. That the church could not hold a service for a specific person...it would not be right to exclude the other members. She let him know that she meant for every member of the parish to be invited and welcomed to the healing service, and that it would only be held in her friend's name...not solely for her friend. He still refused to allow it. A mutual friend of her and her sick friend's was a priest and when she learned of her friend's cancer suggested that they hold a healing service for her. When the young woman informed her that her parish priest had said that it couldn't be done, her priest friend offered to preside at a healing service held at a secular location. The young woman agreed and the healing service was held at a beautiful park located on the river. Many of the young woman's fellow parishioners attended the healing service. One of them, on Sunday morning went to the Parish Priest that had declined to hold the healing service and told him how lovely the healing service was

that had been held the previous day. One week later, the young woman was called by the Chair of the Ordination Exploration Committee and told that she would not be allowed to continue on to Phase II of the process. When she asked why, she was told that her parish priest had withdrawn his support and strongly suggested that she not be allowed to continue on. She was stunned, but she did exactly what the gospel lesson today tells us we should do. She went to her parish priest and asked if she could be told why the support had been withdrawn. She was told that on reflection, it was felt that she was not “priest material”. She then had two members from the OEP committee meet with the two of them to see if this could be resolved and if she could be allowed to continue. The answer was a resounding “NO”. She then went to her parish lay committee and told them what had happened and they called the parish priest in to speak with them, but it was all to no avail. She would not be allowed to continue and she was not to question the decision any further. Needless to say, she was confused, hurt, and distraught. Six months later, her best friend died. The young woman was still reeling from the decision of the OEP Committee, and now was grieving for her lost friend. A short time later, her employer offered her a promotion. Normally she would not even have considered it

because it would entail moving to another state. But, because of the turmoil in her life, she accepted the offer and moved to the Midwest.

As soon as she was settled in, she found a new church. She exhibited such courage and conviction in her faith and trust in God by being able to return to a community of faith, after being so badly wounded by her previous community. As usually happens when God is calling someone to ordained ministry, after awhile people began to approach her about the possibility of ordination exploration. It had been four years, and she had been very active in her new church community and realized that through their love and by God's grace she was finally healed.

She and I had stayed in touch over this time and she called me about a week ago. She was preparing to begin the Ordination Exploration Program again, and her parish priest was wholeheartedly supporting her entry, as was her church family.

So, yes the church community can be mean, and petty, and vindictive. We need to remove the veil of naivety and realize that the community is made up of real life human beings, with all the baggage this entails. But, we also

need to know that human Christian communities can also be loving, supportive, caring and nurturing. And most importantly, as Jesus assures us in the gospel today... “wherever and whenever two or three of you gather, you can be sure I’ll be right there with you.” This young woman knew this better than most of us, and knew, no matter what, no matter who was against her, that God would see her through to accomplish His plan for her life.... She knows that there is nothing that will happen to her today, or in the future, that God and she can’t handle. She knows that we have His promise... “I will never leave you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the age”