

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020 A

Some years ago, I heard Archbishop Harry Flynn at the MN Catholic Education Association in St. Cloud. He told the story that after Mass one day when he was in Louisiana, a woman came up to him and said: ***“You don’t know me, but your Church saved my life.”*** Naturally, he asked her what she meant, and she told him that she had a hard life growing up in a poor family, one of several children of a single mother. For a few years early on, she attended a Catholic school, where one of the teachers told her students over and over: “You are made in the image and likeness of God.” And, when they would misbehave, as children sometimes do, she would remind them – and perhaps herself as well: “You are made in the image and likeness of God ... you can do better than this.”

As the years went on, this woman’s life took a series of turns for the worse. Bad relationships, drugs and alcohol, unpaid bills, theft, and more; a pattern all too common. Finally, one day she just lost all hope; she could see no reason to go on. She borrowed a car, drove to a remote bridge, and was ready to end her life. But as she stood there on the railing of that bridge, suddenly, out of nowhere, she heard in her mind the voice of her teacher: *“You are made in the image and likeness of God ... you can do better than this.”* She climbed down, drove to a treatment center, and began the long, painful process of turning her life around.

Last week, we heard Jesus make clear to his opponents that they were citizens BOTH of this world AND of God’s People; they could not play one off against the other. ***They could not use their religion to excuse them from their civic duties, nor their political preferences to excuse them from their responsibilities to God.*** Today’s teaching about the two Greatest Commandments – to Love God AND love your neighbor as yourself – expresses the same ***“both/and”*** theme in different words. While both love of God and love of neighbor were found in the Torah, the Jewish law, ***Jesus alone*** combined them as the summary of the entire revelation of God. All the rest depends on – literally, “hangs from” – those two, measured by the consistency of to what – and to whom – we give our love and practical support. And, as

the parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us, our neighbor must be seen particularly in those who are most vulnerable and in need. Simply, to be authentic, our love of God must be reflected in the love of our neighbors, who bear the image of God – both/and, not either/or. Of course this is much harder; but it is the way Jesus lays out for us.

Economic systems, national boundaries, health plans, armies, elections ... these are human creations, which function well only when shaped by divine wisdom. ***But only God creates human souls***, giving life that lasts even beyond death, as the supreme gift to each person, made in His own image. In Jesus, we see dramatically that eternal life depends on – literally and truly, hangs from – the Cross, where we understand the kind of love He means: not merely warm and benevolent feelings, but ***the commitment to do what is truly in the best interests of another, regardless of the cost***. And for each person, those best interests begin with, depend on – literally, “hang from” – ***the right to life itself, the condition for the enjoyment of all other goods to which we must also therefore commit*** – both/and, not either/or.

We are in divisive and painful times, in many ways, both in civil society and in our Church. We who follow a Crucified and Risen Lord do not place our hopes in creating an earthly paradise; yet how we live here does matter for how we qualify as citizens for the Kingdom of God. We do not measure the Church’s success by whether or not the world changes, for that is in the hands of God; but rather by how patiently, faithfully, and consistently we profess the truth in love – both love of God, and love of neighbor. Perhaps one day, our reverence for the image of God in every human life may be rewarded by someone coming up to us and saying: ***“You don’t know me, but your Church saved my life.”***