

ORDINARY TIME FIFTEENTH SUNDAY YEAR B 2009 HOMILY

(Amos 7: 12-15; Ephesians 1: 3-10; Mark 6: 7-13)

PREACH REPENTANCE – AND BEGIN WITH YOURSELF

Some of us are savers and some of us are not. It seems to me that the world is divided between these two groups. Our former bishop, James Griffin, tells a story about his Mom who was a big saver. When she passed away, her children found among her possessions a large box filled with pieces of string. This box was marked “string too short to use.”

I have to admit that I am a saver – although I have seen worse. I will never forget the day Fr. Gwinner arrived at St. Paul to take up his duties as one of the priests here. His predecessor (and many of you can guess who this was) had just left with three and a half large truckloads of stuff. Right after this magnificent caravan left, Fr. Dave came into the rectory. I asked Dave if he needed help in unloading his belongings. He said no, I have only a half a carload. Sure enough this was true – and the half a carload included two dogs!

In today's gospel, Jesus sends the Twelve out on mission. It is the same mission that the Father gave to his Son – the mission to preach repentance and healing. It is the same mission that we have in our generation as we continue the work of the disciples of the Lord. Jesus makes it clear that this work will be successful only if concerns about material and physical things are subordinated to the preaching of the kingdom of God. We cannot hope to be real heralds of the Good News unless we are authentic – unless we are truly sincere about our faith and show this in our lives. Selfishness and obsession with financial security are out of place for the bearers of Gospel joy. Just as Jesus told his Twelve to travel light, so he tells us in our day to take a risk in preaching repentance and healing. The risk is that we are to begin with ourselves and have the courage to change our sinful hearts. It is important to live for Jesus alone and this means that we repent completely of a materialistic way of life.

There is a great passage in the novel *Quo Vadis* (?) which was also made into a movie in 1951. This is a story of the early church and especially of St. Peter's struggle to find the courage to lead the first believers in Rome. The passage is about a young Roman who falls in love with a Christian girl. Since he is not a disciple of Jesus, she will have nothing to do with him. One night he follows her to a prayer meeting and there he hears St. Peter (no less) preach with great conviction. After hearing this and seeing the sincerity of the Christians present, including the one he loves, he realizes that if he wants to follow this teaching, he would have to place on a burning pile all of his thoughts and habits, his whole character and indeed his whole nature up until that moment. Only when this fire had burned his entire past into ashes would he be able to fill himself with a life altogether different – to become an entirely new person. This is repentance. It is serious and not half-hearted. This is what Jesus preached. This is what the Twelve preached. This is what we are called to preach. But we cannot do it unless our own repentance is complete.

We live in interesting times. I don't know about you, but I am completely bewildered by the idolization of Michael Jackson. I do not condemn him as a person and I certainly have to admit that he was brilliant

as an entertainer. He had a gift. But the worship that he has received tells me that we live in an age when people are starving for meaning. At one point, after the notice of his memorial service was posted on the internet, that site received 500 million hits in the course of a few hours! That's hunger for meaning. And I am certain that Michael Jackson cannot satisfy that hunger. Only Christ can. And we are his messengers. We are the modern day disciples who are sent on the mission of repentance and healing. And we can only heal if we first repent.

The temptation is to point to the other guy or gal and say, you need to repent. There is so much self-righteousness in the church today. Many members of the church seem to think that they are the only loyal and true Catholics. I am sick of listening to and reading in the media those Catholic commentators who want to divide us into the real Catholics and the deficient ones. I am tired of the partisanship that is used as the litmus test of who are the saints and who are the sinners – a test based on upholding some Catholic teachings and ignoring or even disdaining others.

None of this will do. Christ had none of this in mind. We cannot convince the other guy or gal to repent until we repent and until our repentance brings healing. Then our example of wholeheartedly living out the Gospel will attract others – the Gospel of Life, yes, this is fundamental, but also the Gospel of Justice and the Gospel of Peace. I hope we are all aware that Pope Benedict published an encyclical this week in which he updates Catholic social teaching, especially on the economy. This encyclical is nothing less than an indictment of the system of greed that has brought about this recession. We must embrace this teaching of the successor of Peter – as well as all the other teachings of the church. But we must, above all, live these teachings. Our own lives have to be authentic. It is necessary for us to “travel light” as we preach the Good News. Only then will our Christian lives be attractive to others. Only then will we begin to fill the hunger of folks like the seemingly billions of Michael Jackson fans. Only then will the “Jesus site” receive 500 million hits in a short time. Only then will the healing begin. In today's gospel, Jesus left it up to the Twelve. Today he leaves it up to us. Can we take up the challenge? Do we have the guts to repent totally? If not, the mission will fail. I am ever the optimist. I think we can do it – by the grace and the mercy of Christ the Healer.