

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Job 38:1,8-11

Ps 107:23-24, 25-26, 28-29, 30-31

II Cor 5: 14-17

Mk 4: 35-41

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In second grade, my teacher, the long-suffering Sr. Edna Marie, said something in religion class which went off like a bomb in my brain: “When you follow Jesus, you discover that the more you give away, the more you have left over.”

To be honest, I usually zoned out during religion class, unless it was something interesting like hell or the devil or the Great Flood. I found the business about forgiveness and love a bit dull. Math class was where I always paid attention, because there things were neat and fit together nicely, and seemed much more practical than religion. Now, even with a second-grader’s knowledge of fractions, I knew that when you take away part of a whole, you have less than when you started. Sr. Edna Marie was wrong! I thought I had caught a nun in a mistake, and that’s like hitting the trifecta when you’re in Catholic grade school.

This conflict between mathematics and religion set off a series of very messy experiments in our kitchen, involving cups of flour and sugar, pitchers of water and sand, and bowls of salt and seeds and rice. By the end, the kitchen looked like a wrecking ball had swung through, but I had discovered two things. First, in every case, whatever the substance, whether liquid or solid, edible or inedible, the more you poured out, the less you had left. Second, I discovered that parents *say* they like it when their children show a love for learning, but they really don’t.

The next day, I confronted Sr. Edna Marie with the results of my investigations, and awaited her humble confession of error, and her recommendation that I skip the rest of second grade. Instead, she threw back her head and laughed and said, “It’s not a math problem! It’s a paradox.” I had never heard this word before, and, seeing my confusion, she said, “It’s one of those things that doesn’t seem to make sense at first, but the more you think about it, you more you see it’s true. If you have a cup of flour, and you take some away, you do have less flour. But do you think Jesus was talking about flour?”

Her logic was rigorous, and, as usual, she was right, although it took me a long time to puzzle it all out. Gradually, though, I realized that our faith is chock full of paradoxes: a virgin gives birth, a peasant is the Son of God, eternal life comes from death on a cross, the more we die to ourselves the more alive we become, God is Three yet One. Many of the living did not hear Christ’s call, but Lazarus, his body sealed in a tomb, his ears sealed by death, heard and came forth.

Paradox upon paradox! You can’t flip a page of Scriptures without finding a statement that appears to be illogical and absurd, but turns out to be the God’s honest truth.

Today we are presented with one of these Christian paradoxes, one that hits all of us close to home. Christ turns to the howling winds and the raging seas and says, “Stop!”, and the wind and the water obey. Christ turns to us, in the midst of our sins, and says, “Stop!”, but we do not obey. Storms heed the Lord; our hearts do not. This makes no sense. This is a paradox.

What are we, that God commands galaxies to spin and stars to shine, and they obey Him,

but He commands us to share our bread with the hungry, yet we remain tight-fisted? Why can Christ say to a demon, “Come out!”, and is instantly obeyed, but he says to us, “Go out, and make disciples of all nations,” yet we stand still? In today’s reading from the book of Job, God declares that He can do what no one else can: control the sea, keep the land separate from the water. God says, “Hold back!”, and the mighty waves that could in an instant wash away every field and road and home are stopped. But the wicked desires and evil words and shameful acts that pour forth from our hearts and our mouths and our hands, to these the Lord says, “Hold back! Be pure, be holy, be perfect!”, but the torrent of sin gushes on.

The Lord caresses bent limbs and they are made straight, he touches blind eyes and there is light, he picks up a few loaves and fishes, and they feed thousands. The world was made by, through, and for Jesus Christ, and it obeys him. Yet Christ calls out to us, “Follow me,” and we do not move, or we take a grudging half-step, or we turn and walk away. The Lord of heaven and earth proclaims, “Give, and it will be given to you,” yet we walk past the poor boxes in this church and the poor on the street each week without a glance.

We can do this because we are sinners. We are sinners, and our hearts hold storms more violent than any that have swept the seas, and our minds bring forth more cruelty than any clash of nature. In the face of all that violence and anger, in the face of the human storm, Jesus says, “Stop.” But we choose not to stop. At his command, winds die down, demons flee, sickness vanishes, the weight of death itself is hurled aside. But we say, “No,” and the human storm rages. We are free to disobey. And as sinners, we do disobey. Every day. Over and over.

But thanks be to God that, as Saint Paul proclaims, “whoever is in Christ is a new creation.” The storms that sweep our hearts can be made calm. Christ makes us new because he simply does not give up, he never lets go, he never walks away, he never takes his mercy elsewhere. We never stop sinning, and he never stops loving. When we continue to hurt others and hate others, the Lord does not give up on us. When we ignore those battered by poverty and prejudice, burdened by ignorance and grief, desperate and lost in their loneliness, the Lord does not walk away. He stands in the midst of the storm of our sin, holds out his arms, and shouts, “Quiet! Be still!”

Jesus Christ is a paradox: he is the rock that wears down the storm.

The proof is in this meal. The bread and wine we receive from this altar are the food of conversion, the feast of our new creation. The words, “This is my body, this is my blood,” are the hands of the Lord soothing our stormy hearts, saying to us, “I gave myself up for you. Look on my sacrifice, and let your winds grow slack. See how I died, and let your seas grow smooth. Take this bread and wine and let me come to you as I came to my disciples, let me give to you what I gave to them: my peace, my joy, my very self.” And when we leave, and when we sin again, we return to this table, and the feast is offered to us again. Week after week, month after month, year after year, we receive the body and blood of Christ. He is wearing down our sins. He is slowing down our storms.

Let us give God the thanks He desires: let us hear and obey the words of Christ, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Christ died for sinners, gave this meal to sinners, sacrificed his majesty and power for sinners. Let us hear and obey: “Do this in remembrance of me.” With prayers for that man you hate, eat this bread. With prayers for that woman you despise, take this cup. Furious at someone you work with, angry at a parent, spiteful towards a spouse, cold towards a wayward child, come forward to this altar knowing that you are a storm-filled sinner, and that this is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, who taught and healed and died

and rose that the human storm, our storm, might be hushed and stilled, and we might taste his peace, and we might share his joy. In the raised host you can see the eye of the storm, the circle of peace in a storm-filled world; and when we receive that host, we take some of that peace into ourselves.

It sounds absurd, impossible, unthinkable. But with God all things are possible. Virgins give birth, the Cross gives life, sickness is cured and death is vanquished. Sinners eat their salvation. Peace flows to us in wine. Calm comes to us in bread.

And thus the old storms begin to pass away.