

13th Sunday C. 2007

1. The other night on the McNeil-Leer News Report two men were presenting contradictory positions on some topic, and when the program came to an end, it became clear that they were sitting next to each other at a very small table. I could not believe that they could be so physically close to each other and so opposed to each other in their opinions, and yet were still treating each other so civilly. Why didn't they take a swing at each other? I felt like asking. But of course gentlemen do not do that. Gentlemen—and gentlewomen-- can disagree and yet act respectfully towards their opponents. That is what it means to be civilized. John Courtney Murray, a Jesuit who died in the sixties and who played a leading role at Vatican II in bringing our church to accept as a possible way of being for the Church the USA model of the separation of church and state once defined civilization as people locked in conversation, in discussion and debate. Civilization, he believed, disappears when people remove themselves from the debate and resort to physical force.

2. But it is so hard to be civilized. It is so much easier to withdraw in anger when others disagree with us and then resort to violence, sometimes the violence of language, at other times the violence of physical force. Then we have war either on the personal or the

national or international level. Then we live in the world of revenge and vengeance.

3. We see an example of such behavior in today's Gospel. The Sons of Thunder, James and John, living up to their names, are so angry at the Samaritan village which will not accept their master that they want to destroy it. Jesus rebukes them and moves on.

4. Our second reading for today is from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Paul had brought them to the faith but in a way that did not force them to observe all the Jewish laws because they were not Jews. But now other teachers were trying to make them observe such rules. Therefore, Paul tells them to beware of such teachers. You have been set free by the Gospel, he tells them. Therefore, don't submit to all these rules. On the other hand, he tells them not to use their freedom as an excuse to lead a bad life. Now what does he mean by a bad life? He describes such a life. It is the life of those who are immoral, impure, licentious, idolatrous, sorcerers. And now he focuses in on what we have been talking about: those who are hateful, jealous, given to outbursts of fury, quarrelsome, and creators of factions.

5. So often we find it hard to control our tongues. The other day I was talking to someone, and when he found out I was a Jesuit, he said: Oh, I'm sorry. I did not take that lightly. The conversation went down hill from there. It ended with my walking away. I think I did more poorly than politicians do who learn to stay at the table even while disagreeing with their opponents.

6. There is so much violence in our world today. The war in Iraq continues with more and more death. There is a genocide in process in Darfur in Southern Sudan, and we, the world, have been slow to respond to it. Our own country, we have discovered, has used torture on its prisoners, either doing it ourselves or deporting them to prisons in other countries who did the torturing for us. What a sad decline from the nation we were under a man like Abraham Lincoln who sought no revenge even on those who had attempted to destroy the Union.

7. We can start small by controlling our own anger, by controlling our own tongues, by learning to be patient, by learning to treat those who disagree with us with respect. That is not so small a thing. It is itself an indication that we are living in the spirit of Jesus who rebuked the Sons of Thunder and went on his way to his passion and death in Jerusalem. It is an indication that we are

living the commandment which summarizes, according to our Lord, the entire law: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.