

Sunday 21

Each year in August for the past thirty-two years there has been a Falmouth Road Race. Falmouth, as you no doubt know, is a town at the beginning of Cape Cod right next to Woods Hole, which is a national and international center for research in marine biology. The road race, which begins in Woods Hole and ends in Falmouth Heights, is seven miles long, and for many years now men and women from Ethiopia and other African nations have been winning it. But there are many runners-up, maybe as many as seven thousand, of all shapes and sizes and ages. So the whole Falmouth area is blanketed with people and cars, thousands of them.

Families who live there and who have family members running the race often have family celebrations after the race. I was talking to one such family and was kidding the family matriarch about the people who attended the family gathering after the race, for someone had told me that among the guests there was at least one very black person and one Asian person. “You are really spreading out,” I said to her. “I don’t think that a family gathering here sixty years ago would have had such color diversity.” And then I asked her if she had asked the black man where he was from. “Of course

not,” she said. “It would be offensive to ask such a question.”

“Why?” I asked. “What is wrong with asking a person where he or she is from?” Then we were off and running. In her mind to ask a black person such a question would be to imply that he or she came from Africa, whereas the person’s family had probably been here since the time of the Revolutionary War. But I thought that such a question could be less complicated and more innocent and able to be applied to anyone. “Where are you from?” I argued, is a question we can put to any stranger.

Was she right or was I right? But this much is clear. Today we are a much more diverse society than we were a hundred years ago. Or perhaps we should be a bit more precise. A hundred years ago the challenge was to accept people of a different European stock. Here in Woonsocket the divisions were between the original English stock and the Irish, and then it was between the Irish and French (a bitter struggle at times), and then other groups such as the Italians, the Polish and the Ukrainians. But they were all from the same continent, Europe. But now we have spread out. Now we include all the continents of the world here in our United States. We have people from Africa and Asia and Latin America, and that means people of different colors. Like the film industry, we have gone from black and white into Technicolor. For our children

Technicolor is a given and they don't think twice about it, but for us older folks it is still a bit of a challenge to deal with such diversity. Yet even when we were young in the forties, the colors had begun to change. Think, for example, of the 1947 Rogers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, which was on the television this past Wednesday. Some of the songs were very light-hearted, but the show's theme was a serious one. It was about marriage between whites and South Pacific islanders. The soldier who has fallen in love with a native girl sings about how natural it is for people of different races to fall in love, but people don't find it natural because they have been taught by the age of eight to love and hate.

Our faith is way ahead of us in these matters. The author of this 66th chapter of Isaiah, who was writing 2500 years ago, envisioned a day when all the nations of the world would flock to Jerusalem to adore the true God there. Yes, it is a Jewish centered vision. The people come to Jerusalem and to the God of Israel, but it is nevertheless universal. The whole world will be welcomed there.

Our Christian faith began as a form of Jewish faith. Therefore its first question was what to do with non-Jews who wanted to become members of the community. There were different answers

to that question, but the one which finally prevailed was Paul's, and it was universal in tone. Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to become Christians. Belief in Jesus as the Son of God is all that matters. And so Paul writes to the Galatians: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28).

When we meet a stranger who looks a little different to us, there are just two thoughts which should be going through our heads and our hearts. First, here is another human being. Second, here is someone who could be not only my fellow human being but also my fellow believer in Jesus Christ. All the rest is extra. These two thoughts will be enough to make us treat this stranger with respect and courtesy and dignity--in a word, with love. And that is enough.