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Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

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The Peace Pulpit

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Of course, the first responsibility is with the parents, but the sponsors, Godparents, and all of us share that responsibility to try to pass on to this infant our awareness of God, our understanding of God, our understanding of Jesus, our understanding of Jesus. And so we listen deeply to the scriptures of today, and I remind you again that this is a continuing passage that we have been listening to for a number of weeks.

One of the first things that I think is very important for us who commit ourselves to pass on our faith is to understand Jesus. Last Sunday in the Gospel lesson, we came to a point in that journey to Jerusalem where perhaps we understood a new aspect of Jesus, a Jesus who was in anguish. A Jesus who found it difficult to accept God's will. He's on his way to Jerusalem. He knows he is going to be tortured and killed, and he wants to step back and not do it. He even prays, "God deliver me from this," but then he goes on. He accepts God's will. But because he is like us in every way except sin, it is only with struggle.

We have to know this about Jesus, because it helps us when we make the decision as we did last week when we said, “Yes we will continue on this journey. We will go with Jesus.” But we know that we go with the Jesus who understands us, who is like us, who also finds it difficult to accept suffering and hardships in our lives. But the Jesus who has a trust in God that will bring him through, and we share with Jesus that trust.

Today we learn more about God, about Jesus, that we must pass on to this infant.

One of the really important things is that we have to understand that our relationship with Jesus can't be something superficial. In the Gospel, when the person asks Jesus the question, “Are there going to be a lot of people saved? How many?” Jesus doesn't answer the question, if you notice. He says, in a way, “That's the wrong question. Don't ask how many are going to be saved. Think about yourself. That's the important thing. Am I in relationship with God?”

Jesus makes sure you understand that it can't be superficial. The person says, “We ate and drank with you. You taught in our streets.” They thought that because they had some contact with Jesus, then they would be among those who would be welcomed into the reign of God. But Jesus says, “I don't know you.”

You see, our relationship with Jesus has to be deep. It has to be something real. It has to be something that is happening every day. Not just something superficial where we say, as in another part of the Gospel Jesus said, “Some people say ‘Lord, Lord’ ” and think that is going to connect them to Jesus. No. It's not those who say ‘Lord, Lord,’ but those who do the will of God, Jesus said, they are the ones who are welcomed into the fullness of God's life. So we have to keep on striving to have this deep relationship with Jesus. Not something superficial.

That is what we have to try to pass on to this infant. Our awareness of Jesus, our connection with Jesus, our willingness to follow Jesus. Our willingness to do the will of God. Not just talk about it, but to do it.

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There are a couple of other very striking things we learn about God and about Jesus in today's scriptures that we will want to pass on. All of us, I am sure, are used to thinking of God as father. In the second lesson today, the author tells us, “what you endure is in order to correct you. God treats you as sons and daughters, and what son or daughter is not corrected by their father?” That's an image of God that we are very familiar with. God is a father to us. It is a beautiful image.

But it is important for us also to know God as a mother. That's an image of God that we have let kind of drift away from us. We seldom pray to God as our mother and some people would even be shocked to think, “God our Mother, hallowed be your name” and so on. But in that passage from Isaiah, from the

very end of the book of Isaiah, we're taught that God is a mother to us. "You'll be nursed and carried in her arms. Fondled in her lap. As a son or daughter is comforted by their mother, so I will comfort you."

God is a mother to us. That's a beautiful image that we ought to nurture in our hearts and minds. Not just think of God as father and often, as in that letter to the Hebrews, is the one who disciplines us. But God is our mother who nurtures and loves and cherishes us. That is a very beautiful image of God, and it is one that we have to build up in our awareness that God is father and mother to us.

The final thing that we learn today in the scriptures that is very important to pass on is that God's mercy and God's goodness far exceeds our own narrow concepts. Like that person in the Gospel, we want to say, "OK, how many are going to be saved and what did they do or didn't do and why" and so on. We're looking to judge and to condemn. But that is not the way God acts.

In the passage from Isaiah, the chosen people have been in exile. These are the people who have come to think of themselves as God's own people. They've been in exile for 80 years and it's been a terrible experience. But Isaiah helps them understand that their exile was also a time that knowledge of God was spread, and people of every nation and background began to be aware of God, not just the chosen few, the special people.

Isaiah describes what is happening as they are returning. God says, "Now I am going to gather the nations of every tongue, and they will witness my glory. I will perform a wonderful thing among them. I will send some of their survivors to the nations." And the author lists, Tarshish, Put and Lud, Mosoch, Tubal and Javan, and these in that text are the limits of the known world. So God is drawing people from everywhere, and "they will proclaim my glory among the nations. They will bring your brothers and sisters from all the nations as an offering to God. They will come to my holy mountain at Jerusalem, says God."

And so God was bringing forth everyone and as the gospel message reminds us, we may be surprised at those who are welcomed into the reign of God. The ones we thought of as last will be first perhaps. Come ahead of us. Those who we thought were first will be last. God is reaching out to all, not just a few, and we have to have that same attitude. We have to be ready to welcome all into our midst and to understand that God works through every nation, every people, every religious tradition. God's mercy is wide, vast mercy that embraces all.

I guess I might say one final thing here because it is so striking in this passage from Isaiah. "Then I will choose priests and Levites, even from them." Priests and Levites. Now in the Jewish tradition, in order to be a priest, you had to be from a particular tribe, the Tribe of Levy, and you had to be from an individual family, one particular family. That's all. Now God is saying I am going to choose priests and Levites from all this vast gathering of people.

What if we had the openness of the vision of God? Would we be having so much trouble finding priests to serve our parishes? No. Because we would be more like God and say we can welcome married people, women to be priests, just as God shows us through Isaiah, that God welcomes, not just those that Jewish tradition said could be priests, but people from every nation regardless of their sex or their national tradition and so on. God says priests and Levites will be chosen from all. We could do the same thing in our church.

What I am suggesting and hope that we will accept is that God has a vision that is vast and unlimited. Our vision is often very narrow, very constricted. We have to try to open ourselves to do, become more like God. We have to try to be more welcoming to all. We have to try to open ourselves to new ideas about who could minister in our church. We have to try to open ourselves to a new awareness of God, as father as mother, as one who loves and nurtures. As we open ourselves to all of that and grow in our own awareness of God as revealed to us in Jesus, this is what we will pass on to this infant, Justin Michael, who will become part of our community today.

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