

Fourth Sunday after Trinity
June 23, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Galatians 3:26-29
Luke 9:18-24

When I was in seminary, I lived on campus for the first two years; so I had opportunity while sharing meals in the cafeteria to converse with people whose world view was radically different than my own. One of my most memorable conversations was with a woman who insisted that the talents of Michael Jordan were nothing special and all of us could achieve the same mastery of the basketball court if we just put our mind to it. For those of you too young to remember him, Michael Jordan was the LeBron James of his day, winning NBA championships and MVP awards year after year. I wondered, naturally, where one could get an idea so ridiculous on its face, and I have some theories. But the reason I relate this story today is that my classmate used the Epistle we heard today to justify her lunacy.

This short passage from Galatians is in the modern day the most abused and most often misinterpreted verse or two in the entire Bible. St. Paul's insistence that in Jesus Christ there is neither slave nor free, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, has been used to promote a theology and an agenda St. Paul would not recognize and which the Church now uses much of its energy to refute. And that agenda is well known to you.

Like the woman I encountered during my seminary days, many people maintain that every person is interchangeable with every other person. This form of egalitarianism is so radical that it does not only deny the unique and particular gifts that God bestows upon each and every one of His children. This radical egalitarianism even denies the substantial and obvious difference between males and females. In other words, it denied God's plan for human flourishing, rejecting complementarity of the sexes, complementarity of peoples, complementarity of gifts, and then proposes a sterile sameness all in the name of equality. Not only am I interchangeable with Michael Jordan, I'm interchangeable with every mother in this city, in this country, in this world.

Fortunately for us, the Church in her wisdom has in our liturgy juxtaposed this passage from Galatians with the Gospel we heard from St. Luke. In the Gospel, we heard two things. First, we heard St. Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. We know from St. Matthew's account of this same incident that Peter's revelation was the basis for his headship of the apostles, a headship to which St. Paul attests in the first chapter of the Letter to the Galatians. Quite plainly St. Paul, who recognized St. Peter's headship, cannot mean that there exists no difference between his own gifts and St. Peter's, or between his role and St. Peter's. That is, they were different, a difference St. Paul did not deny, but in fact emphasized when he pointed out that he was an apostle to the Gentiles and Peter an apostle to the Jews. The fact that they were different was not bad for the Church, but good, as their complementary gifts issued in more souls won for Holy Mother Church.

The second thing we heard in St. Luke's Gospel today has to do with bearing our cross, the discipleship that every Christian must undertake. Jesus says, "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it." What we see here is true equality: each of us has the opportunity for salvation, without any qualification about who we are, what our background is, whether we have a past, if we're Jewish or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. The only qualification

for salvation is our willingness to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. Jesus excludes no one from the possibility of salvation, an equality borne out in His earthly ministry and then proclaimed by the Church from the beginning.

This equality, then, is what St. Paul is talking about in today's Epistle. Where under the Law of Moses differences disqualified people from membership in the household of God, made distinctions between who was in and who was out, under the New Covenant this was not so. Anyone who receives the Sacrament of Baptism is eligible for salvation, is qualified to take up his cross daily and follow Jesus. The fact that I am a Gentile, or you are a female, or he is a slave—none of this means we cannot be saved by the Blood of Christ. Faith in the efficacy of His sacrifice unites us. We cannot be excluded from the Kingdom of God because of who we are. If we are to be excluded, it will be because of what we believe or fail to believe, because of what we've done or failed to do.

This beautiful teaching has issued in the triumph of merit, so that today we understand nepotism, sexism, racism, and classism to be sins against humanity. They still exist, but we know now they are sin. Indeed, it is not because we will or even can all do the same thing that we are all equal. We are equal because God made each of us and gave everyone the same opportunity, the same eligibility, to serve Him. The truth is we don't even want everyone to be the same, for it is the complementarity of gifts showered on us as God wills that brings life to the world. To deny the necessity of complementarity and its goodness is in a sense to dismiss our own existence, for everyone on earth proceeded from complementarity.

Thus, the triumph of merit invites us to embrace and use the gifts God has given us, not seeing our differences as a burden to be overcome, but a blessing to be received. We are all encouraged to make sacrifices according to the role we have been assigned, carrying our own particular cross behind Jesus, and thus participating in the salvation of the world.

A theology that truly embraces our differences, then, has implications for parish life. I have been given the role of being your pastor, your father in Christ, and your leader in this small corner of the Church. But I do not possess every gift, so I require your help, if we are to be a beacon of light and hope to the world. Therefore, we have reconstituted the parish pastoral and finance councils as a means to help fulfill our mission and ministry, so that we may bear our crosses together and be that much more effective in the proclamation of the Gospel. We have announced it the past couple of weeks, but we have also placed a suggestion box in the back of the church to solicit your ideas, ideas the councils of our parish will discuss with me as we map a way forward.

Though at one time I harbored dreams of being a professional athlete, I never have wanted to be Michael Jordan or anyone else. My desire back then and my desire now is to do what God has given me to do, to save my life by losing it in Him and bearing my cross to your benefit. I pray that that be your objective in life, as well, that together we may discern why God has accomplished this work in us and how by His grace He will bring it to completion.