

Nineteenth Sunday – August 9, 2015

Have you ever found yourself “murmuring?” We look at the world around us and think, “How can things be so out of control?” We look at our own troubles and think, “Where does it all end?” And so, we murmur. Murmuring is like a smoldering fire that could, at any moment, burst into the flames of anger and even violence. Murmuring says two things at once: “I don’t get it,” and “I don’t like it.” Murmuring reaches Jesus’ ears in today’s gospel, just like it did to Moses’ ears in the Sinai desert centuries before.

Despite the murmurings of the crowd, Jesus was patient. But he did not alter or dilute his message to appease his detractors. Jesus was no “spin doctor.” Fully aware that a more digestible message might attract more followers or even make him more popular, he sticks to his guns: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” For Jesus, it’s all about the love of the Father already in his heart – a love he longs to share with everyone without exception.

Let’s ratchet up today’s Gospel into the present, right into the Nightly News. In late June, the Supreme Court recognized same sex marriage as a fundamental human right guaranteed by the Constitution. Not a small number of Catholics, and many others as well felt beleaguered and not a little afraid. Perhaps there’s a lot of murmuring going on. What does the Church teach about marriage and has it changed? The short answer is and always has been this: marriage is the life-long union of a man and a woman given by God for the purpose of their mutual love and for the procreation and education of children. Sacred Scripture confirms this meaning of marriage with these words of Jesus: “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator made them male and female and said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Matthew 19:4-5)? We simply cannot twist Jesus’ words. Married love is unique in God’s plan for the bodily union of a husband and wife. In fact, Jesus raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament which means that, for the baptized marriage is a sign and a means of God’s grace.

How then do we respond to those who say, “If you want to accept me, you must accept what I do?” Church teaching and common sense make a distinction between who a person is and what that person does. We are all children of a loving God, made in his image and likeness. Thus we are all worthy of respect. We are also called to follow God’s plan and the moral law expressed first of all in the Sacred Scriptures. In short, we are called both to recognize our common human dignity and also to live according to God’s plan. Disagreement is not discrimination. We do not force people to agree with us; we ask to be granted the same freedom to hold our beliefs.

So what do we do moving forward? We continue to put forth our point of view winsomely, invitingly, and non-violently, loving our opponents and reaching out to those with whom we disagree. As St. John Paul II said, the Church always proposes, never imposes. And we take a deep breath, preparing for whatever may come, but taking courage from a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. The Church has faced this sort of thing before – and we’re still standing.