

**22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 30, 2009**

Over the past few weeks, we have been treated to a variety of interesting and compelling stories about God's desire to feed our deepest hungers and slake our unquenchable thirsts. And none of these meditations were to be taken only literally. Our hungers and thirsts are far too profound for that analysis. God wants to gift us again and again. It's been a kind of liturgical summer holiday. All uplifting, positive messages.

But I'm afraid today's readings bring us back to Gospel reality with a jolt. They are very challenging—perhaps too challenging for a late August morning (evening). But here they are.

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser suggests the readings today are about a topic quite familiar to all of us. It can be summarized in a deceptively simple question: is there a "litmus test" for being an authentic Christian? Is there some sure way to know if any of us are really following the path laid out in Jesus' life for us? An interesting question. Don't you think?

Let me quote Father Rolheiser at some length as he lays out the question for us, for a contemporary audience listening to today's readings. He says:

"Everywhere, in the name of religion, truth, morality, ideology, or

political- correctness, we're erecting various tests of orthodoxy and morals. Usually one issue of morality, dogma, dress, or political- correctness is set up as the litmus test. How you stand on that issue determines how you're judged in general, and depending on whether you're liberal or conservative, that issue can be anything from abortion, to feminism, to gay marriage, to war, to poverty, to capital punishment, to clerical dress, to (inside of Islam) whether or not a woman covers her face in public. But invariably, there is a litmus test, one issue on which you are judged." I think he's right. We do love simplicity.

So, he asks next:

"It's worth asking: did Jesus have a litmus test? Is there one issue, principle, or dogma within his teaching that can function as a criterion for judgment, so that we are, in effect, a Christian or not, depending on where we stand on that issue?" ("The Litmus test for Being Christian." The Center for Liturgy at St. Louis University.)

Father Rolheiser is a braver man than I. He actually answers his own question in the affirmative and then spells out exactly what he thinks Jesus' litmus test was—and still is. (I just want us to think about the question a bit; you answer it for yourself today.) But for him, it has to do with four things:

1. Keeping the two great commandments that summarize the ten: loving God and one's neighbor. 2. A mandate to social justice in the real world in which we live; social justice to others that is non-negotiable, and not optional within Christian discipleship. 3. Involvement within a concrete community of faith. Discipleship is never a solo project entertained by lone-rangers. And 4. A mellowness of heart. Discipleship is never just about *what* we do, but *how* we do it: always with warm, mellow, compassionate, and grateful hearts.

But the final kicker, for Rolheiser, is that the final litmus test for Jesus requires a generosity far greater than that of most religious leaders he knew (like the Pharisees in today's Gospel). For a mature disciple, Jesus asks (quite repeatedly): can you love your enemy? Can you bless someone who curses you? Can you forgive—even a murderer?

Deuteronomy tells us today that God's law is important. Following the great commandments is the path to wisdom and intelligence. St. Mark agrees. But then suggests that Jesus clearly does not think that is enough. Hence his almost brutal condemnation of the self-righteous religious leaders and their well educated followers who get lost in the minutiae of what they think will make them "faithful." Perhaps Jesus was thinking of the Psalm we just sang together: "The one who does justice will live in the Lord's Presence."

And then, just for another change of pace, listen to James' letter:

“Dearest Brothers and Sisters...be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves....Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their affliction....”

(Though my words for today were fashioned long before Senator Kennedy's funeral liturgy yesterday, it is interesting and informative that Fr. Mark Hessian chose the same image to celebrate the Senator's commitment to his faith in public life: care for the widows and orphans—in other words, the poor among us.

There are serious and acrimonious debates throughout our nation these days about widows and orphans, about the unemployed and under-insured, about basic rights such as health care, and dignity in both life and at death. What is a truly Christian response in light of Jesus' litmus test?

Does this very contemporary debate about the poor in our own churches and communities belong in an after-church discussion, later in the parish hall downstairs? Or do these questions belong at the heart of our worship together—at this altar?

This is not a question of “What would Jesus do?” like the good bumper stickers ask. We *know* what Jesus did, and we *know* what Jesus said God

does. This is always what God does—cares for the widow, and orphan, and the poor. That's what God *always* does!

Now *our* question is: can we let God do *through us* what God always does? After all, we are the Body of Christ. Let God be God—in us.

The lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer do seem to be over—at least in church.