

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year C)

### I. Introduction

One of the effects of original sin is that, as human beings, we tend to be self-centered, and often have an overly-exalted opinion of ourselves. For instance, when Napoleon was planning his great invasion of Russia in 1812, someone warned him, “Sir, remember that man proposes, but God disposes.” The French emperor loftily responded, “In this case, I am the one who both proposes and disposes.” The invasion, of course, ended in disaster, and set into motion the chain of events that led to Napoleon’s downfall. Many American presidents were also perceived as having a high opinion of themselves. Someone once said of Woodrow Wilson, “He’s the only person I’ve ever known who seems to strut while he’s sitting down,” and one of Theodore Roosevelt’s children remarked, “Father always wanted to be the bride in every wedding and the corpse in every funeral.”

Being self-centered can end up making us look foolish. A recently-appointed Army colonel moved into his new office. While sitting behind his desk, a private knocked at his door. Wanting to appear indispensable and influential, the colonel said “Just a minute; I’m on the phone,” and picked up the receiver. He carried on a pretend conversation, saying, “Yes, sir, General. I’ll call the President this afternoon. No, sir, I won’t forget.” Then he hung up and said, “All right, Private, what can I help you with?” “Well, sir,” answered the private, “I’m here to hook up your phone” (Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, p. 325). As you can imagine, this message was the last thing the colonel expected, or wanted, to hear. No one enjoys having his or her pride punctured, and sometimes the reaction is an unpleasant one—but the fact is the world doesn’t revolve around us, and the sooner we accept this, the better off we’ll be. We have a saying that sometimes the truth hurts. When that’s the case, it’s probably because we’re focused on ourselves, instead of on Jesus. He is Truth, with a capital T—and when we put Him at the center of our lives, everything else falls into proper place.

### II. Development

The quickest way to become unpopular and even controversial is to tell people what they don’t want to hear—no matter how true and vitally important the message may be. Jesus experienced this many times, beginning early in His public ministry when He went to the synagogue in His home town of Nazareth. Simply by pointing out that God’s blessings had been given in the past to foreigners like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, Our Lord enraged the people to the point where they wanted to throw Him over a cliff—though they were unable to do so, as it was not yet His time to die. Human sinfulness and pride can easily cause us to reject God’s message, no matter how badly we need to hear it. In the 1st Reading the Lord warned the prophet Jeremiah that the political and religious leaders, and the people, would fight against him; because of the power of God’s Word, they would not prevail—but in resisting the truth, they would pronounce a judgment on themselves. Pride and self-satisfaction make it almost impossible for us to experience or share genuine love—and as St. Paul teaches us in the 2nd Reading, love is the key to everything. As he says, love is not jealous, pompous,

inflated, rude, or quick-tempered—and this means that one important sign our love is real is our willingness to hear the truth about ourselves and accept it in all humility.

### III. Conclusion

A famous political cartoonist was at a party, and someone suggested he draw sketches or caricatures of everyone present. He did so, passing them around for everyone to see, and people laughed at them and kidded one another about their appearance. There was one interesting phenomenon, however: everyone quickly recognized the humorous pictures of all the other guests, but almost no one recognized him or herself, and the few who did were offended (Cavanagh, *More Sower's Seeds*, p. 74). We don't like having our pretensions punctured and our faults pointed out to us, but if our love for God and neighbor is genuine, we must be willing to listen to the truth in all humility. The heart of the Gospel message centers around the word "repent," and the first step in repentance is recognizing and admitting that we are sinners, and that we cannot save ourselves.

In practical terms, this means we must not become self-satisfied, whether by thinking we don't need to grow or improve in any significant way, or that we can settle for a routine, comfortable experience of religion, or that we can ignore those teachings of the Church we don't like. If our faith doesn't from time to time shake us up a little bit, it isn't fully alive; if we've stopped consciously trying to come closer to God, He may allow the events of life, or the words of other people, to challenge us, confront us, and upset us. While it's nice to be aware of our good qualities and our strengths, it's far more necessary to be aware of our moral failings and weaknesses of character, honestly admitting them and humbly asking God's help in overcoming them. This is the only way we'll make true spiritual progress, giving us a chance to enter Heaven as soon as we die, instead of having to spend possibly a long time of cleansing and purification in purgatory. This process also requires that we strive to avoid judging others or considering ourselves superior to them; we have to give people the benefit of the doubt, treat them as we wish to be treated, and seriously consider the possibility that, in any given instance, they're right and we're wrong. The people of Nazareth were unwilling to do this when they heard Jesus speak, and so they missed out on the miracles and spiritual gifts He wanted to give them. The Lord earnestly desires that we not make this same mistake.

When we're driving a car, we must recognize our blind spots, in which we have difficulty seeing other traffic, and proceed with caution. It's even more important to do this on our journey through life. Pride and self-importance allow the devil to blind us by covering the windows to our souls; honesty and humility allow the Lord to wipe them clean. A "spiritual car wash" may not be much fun, but it's something all of us need from time to time. If we pray, "Lord, show me the truth about myself, and help me to accept it and use Your grace in working to change whatever needs to be changed in me," He'll gladly answer that prayer—and then we'll have true reason to rejoice in who we are, and in who we're becoming.