

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, September 9th 2018
Deacon Bill Pitocco

Peace in the world today is being smothered by the volume of information being generated and pushed out to us and the values of those generating it! Using those worldly values, mass and social media tell us these stories and then we judge ourselves against them. They are by nature superficial and they work off of appearances, on good looks, on images, sounds, and headlines that capture our attention at first glance. They create this environment then where we are continually tempted to judge things based on their appearance, especially other people. If they drive the right car, wear the right clothes we tend to think well of them. If not, we tend to look down on them. Now I'm not saying we all do that, but I am saying that it is a natural tendency for all of us and its being fueled by these one way, immediate, and unregulated communication and information systems.

But that's not how Jesus judges people. That's not how Jesus thinks of us. St. James, in today's Second Reading, reminds us of this fundamental aspect of Jesus Christ: he values us not because of what we look like, how much money we have, or how popular we are. Jesus looks deeper. What matters to him is not what we have, but who we are:

children of God, created in his image and likeness, and in need of his saving grace. And if that's what matters to Jesus, then that's what ought to matter to us, members of his Catholic Church. That's why St. James drives home the lesson that we should treat all people with sincere respect, regardless of what they look like or what they can do for us. Jesus Christ died on the cross not out of a generic love for humankind, but out of a specific, unconditional, redeeming love for every single person. His interest in and dedication to every individual explains why racism, nationalism, terrorism, anti-Semitism, and every form of prejudice and injustice are sinful. As his followers, we are called to imitate Christ's universal love, a love that goes beyond appearances. This is one reason why we grow in wisdom as we grow in our friendship with Christ, because he teaches us to see the deeper truth behind appearances.

One of my favorite movies when I was growing up was the Wizard of Oz. (By the way, they just found the pair of Ruby slippers that had been stolen) So you remember the scene, right, where Dorothy, Toto and their three friends show back up at the Emerald city to see the wizard. They had just melted the Wicked Witch and they want to claim the promises he made to them. So, they are brought into the "Throne room"! And, the wizard says, "come to me tomorrow, for I must have time to think it over." The Lion gets upset, he's heard this before, so he

gave a large, loud roar, which was so fierce that Toto jumped away from him in alarm and tipped over the screen that stood in a corner which then caught on to a curtain and pulled it apart enough that you could see into this little room. And there, standing behind the curtain, is an old man, who seemed to be as much surprised as they were. And so, they confront him about his status and he says, “Hush, don’t speak so loud, or you will be overheard—and I should be ruined. I’m supposed to be a Great Wizard.” And Dorothy says “well aren’t you?” To which the Wizard replies, “Not a bit, my dear; I’m just a common man. I have fooled everyone so long that I thought I should never be found out. It was a great mistake my ever letting you into the Throne Room”.

Not only was the Wizard living a false life, here are these four people who risked and changed their life because they thought he was something that he wasn’t. Jesus Christ is never deceived by the Wizards that we and the world around us construct: he sees right through to the heart, to the deepest truth. He looks beyond mere appearances. And as our friendship with him deepens, we gradually learn to see the truth too. Christ looks beyond appearances; he thinks and loves at a deeper level. With his grace, we can learn to do the same. And if we do, we will experience great benefits. We will experience greater interior peace and confidence. One of the deepest needs of the human heart is the need to be loved, to be appreciated. The world around us tells us to fulfill that

need by focusing on appearances: money, good luck, success, achievement, popularity... But those things are fragile; they come and go. And if we build our love and appreciation on a fragile foundation, we will always be interiorly insecure, fearful, and anxious. But once we realize that God looks much deeper, and that his appreciation and love for us is based not on what we do but who we are - his beloved children, then we have a foundation that can't be shaken.

Failure, weakness, flaws, even sins - none of these things lessen God's love for us: he looks deeper than all of these things. We don't have to earn his love, and so we don't have to be afraid of losing it. By learning to see ourselves and others as God sees us We can also bring peace to others. When we judge others only by appearances, natural conflicts between personalities, races, and opinions cause division, rivalry, and resentment. But when we recognize that in Christ we are all brothers and sisters, we become more capable of healing divisions, turning rivalries into partnerships, and staving off resentment with sincere respect. Look, the values of this fallen world are being magnified by all this media and it can seem overwhelming to be the Catholic voice in the world today. But remember the peace of Jesus Christ begins inside of each of US! A peace that will make the deaf hear and the mute speak. That will help people to open their eyes and see the face of Jesus in each other! It is our responsibility as Catholics to bring this peace to the world,

from inside of us out into the world! And our first reading today reminds us to Be strong and have no Fear – God is with you! When we receive Christ today at Communion, let us all ask him for the grace to follow his example of looking beyond mere appearances, to be strong in him and to commit to letting peace on earth begin with me!