

Gathering the Scattered
July 18, 2021, Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Gospel of Mark 6:30-34
Fr. John

One of the most important elements of the liturgy of the Mass happens before we even intone the opening hymn. It is the simple act of coming together - of gathering. Prior to Covid we probably wouldn't have given this a second thought. However, now that we have had a year and a half of restrictions governing how we come together or perhaps don't come together and having had to practice social distancing and relying on meeting using electronic virtual devices, we have come to appreciate the human need for gathering.

The reading from both the prophet Jeremiah and Mark's gospel address the issues that arise when either because of poor leadership or self pre-occupation people become scattered and isolated.

Jesus took pity on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd and Jeremiah laments how the spiritual leaders of his day were more of a divisive rather than a unifying element among the people.

Each of us is that divided flock of sheep. There are many parts of ourselves that we can no longer harmonize. We feel drawn in different directions and driven apart in so many ways: Driven apart:

- by our desires and hopes that clash with our responsibilities at home.
- by our talents that often seem to be wasted in our family or community - unrecognized at times even by our church.
- by requests for help from others, all very legitimate yet interfering with our necessary privacy and time for prayer or with our duties towards family and community.
- by promises that stack up against us and pressure us beyond the limits of our time and energy.

This type of scattering does not come from 'bad shepherds' but from good desires in ourselves and from the rightful needs in others. We find ourselves running madly off in all directions feeling tense and nervous. We are not at peace with ourselves and those whom we love most.

The other source of scattering, of course, as Jeremiah points out comes from 'bad shepherds' namely anyone who has not been true to the responsibility of leadership, authority and direction which has been entrusted to them. This applies to parents, clergy, teachers, and people in the business or political fields among others.

It is due to the egocentric tendencies that we all struggle with and leads to alienation from friends, even family by our anger, rudeness, greed, or selfishness.

When we have said or done things that are foolish, imprudent which others hold against us.

When we have over reacted to other people's faults and refused forgiveness toward them.

Whatever the reason, we are scattered and fractured.

Because the effects show up within ourselves and with our families and community, the pain is severe. I think the events concerning the Church in Canada which have been well publicised over this last month and have been very upsetting for many who are searching for a proper response both from within themselves and from our church leaders. In that regard, I would strongly recommend reading Fr. Ron Rolheiser's remarks entitled, 'Why Stay in the Church'. *Note: Included with this homily.*

So ultimately who or what will gather us? It might have been the late church sociologist and novelist, Fr. Andrew Greeley who once defined the Catholic Church as 'Here Comes Everybody'. Indeed we **are** one of the most diverse of groups in all of humanity - ethnically, linguistically, socially, politically, and geographically. Yet every Sunday or maybe less frequently hundreds of millions of us gather for Eucharist in all parts of the world. We are joined in spirit, by millions of other Christians of other traditions. And it is Christ the Good Shepherd that gathers us. It is the risen Christ Who ultimately will gather **all** peoples of the earth to Himself as the cosmic and universal Shepherd.

At a certain point in Jesus' ministry, people walked away thinking that his teachings were too difficult. He then asked Peter and the other apostles: 'Will you also walk away?' To which Peter replied 'To whom else can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.'

Indeed - to whom else can we go?

Why Stay In The Church?

Ron Rolheiser, OMI

July 12, 2021



Several weeks ago after giving a lecture at a religious conference, the first question from the audience was this one: How can you continue to stay in a church that played such a pivotal part in setting up and maintaining residential schools for the indigenous people of Canada? How can you stay in a church that did that?

The question is legitimate and important. Both in its history and in its present, the church has enough sin to legitimize the question. The list of sins done in the name of the church is long: the Inquisition, its support for slavery, its role in colonialism, its link to racism, its role in thwarting women's rights, and its endless historical and present compromises with white supremacy, big money, and political power. Its critics are sometimes excessive and unbalanced, but, for the most part, the church is guilty as charged.

However, this guilt isn't unique to the church. The same charges might be leveled against any of the countries in which we live. How can we stay in a country that has a history of racism, slavery, colonialism, genocide of some of its indigenous peoples, radical inequality between its rich and its poor, one that is callous to desperate refugees on its borders, and one within which millions of people hate each other? Isn't it being rather selective morally to say that I am ashamed to be a Catholic (or a Christian) when the nations we live in share the same history and the same sins?

Still, since the church is supposed to be leaven for a society and not just a mirror of it, the question is valid. Why stay in the church? There are good apologetic answers on this, but, at the end of the day, for each of us, the answer has to be a personal one. Why do I stay in the church?

First, because the church is my mother tongue. It gave me the faith, taught me about God, gave me God's word, taught me to pray, gave me the sacraments, showed me what virtue looks like, and put me in contact with some living saints. Moreover, despite all its shortcomings, it was for me authentic enough, altruistic enough, and pure enough to have the moral authority to ask me to entrust my soul to it, a trust I've not given any other communal entity. I'm very comfortable worshipping with other religions and sharing soul with non-believers, but in the church in which I was raised, I recognize home, my mother tongue.

Second, the church's history is not univocal. I recognize its sins and openly acknowledge them, but that's far from its full reality. The church is also the church of martyrs, of saints, of infinite generosity, and of millions of women and men with big, noble hearts who are my moral exemplars. I stand in the darkness of its sins; but I also stand in the light of its grace, of all the good things it has done in history.

Finally, and most important, I stay in the church because the church is all we've got! There's no other place to go. I identify with the ambivalent feeling that rushed through Peter when, just after hearing Jesus say something which had everyone else walk away from him, Peter was asked, "do you want to walk away too?" and he (speaking for all the disciples) replied: "We'd like to, but we have no place else to go. Besides we recognize that, despite everything, you still have the words of everlasting life."

In essence, Peter is saying, "Jesus, we don't get you, and what we get we often don't like. But we know we're better off not getting it with you than going any place else. Dark moments notwithstanding, you're all we've got!"

The church is all we've got! Where else can we go? Behind the expression, I am spiritual, but not religious (however sincerely uttered) lies either an invincible failure or a culpable reluctance to deal with the necessity of religious community, to deal with what Dorothy Day called "the asceticism of church life". To say, I cannot or will not deal with an impure religious community is an escape, a self-serving exit, which at the end of the day is not very helpful, not least for the person saying it. Why? Because for compassion to be effective it needs to be collective, given the truth that what we dream alone remains a dream but what we dream with others can become a reality. I cannot see anything outside the church that can save this world.

There is no pure church anywhere for us to join, just as there is no pure country anywhere for us in which to live. This church, for all its checkered history and compromised present, is all we have. We need to own its faults since they are our faults. Its history is our history; its sin, our sin; and its family, our family – the only lasting family we've got.