

4th Sunday of Easter, Cycle C: April 24, 25 2010

If you had to guess what the most common first word a child would speak, what would you guess? Think for a moment. Certainly "mama or papa" would be on our short list, or perhaps the word "no", which children seem to learn early on. But the word that comes to mind for me is the word that almost every child utters the instant that someone tries to take something from them, you know the word. The word is "mine".

Mine. How many times did we say that as we were growing up? Mine, mine, mine... At an early age we came to understand what was ours; furthermore, others were not entitled to our stuff. And so the battles ensued, tears were shed, voices were raised and tantrums were thrown--- all in the name of protecting our "stuff".

Now, possessiveness is not limited to children. In fact, we may become even more possessive as adults. Most of us have things that we won't let anyone touch or borrow. It may be a valuable piece of jewelry, an antique car, clothing, golf clubs and the list just goes on and on.

Well, for the Jewish people, the one thing that they were most possessive about was their God. That's right, God, and more specifically, their relationship to that God. You see, they were God's peoples, God's chosen ones. And for some, this meant that he loved them more than he did other peoples.

Thus, it's not surprising that this mentality caused problems for the early followers of Jesus. Was Jesus and his message just for Jews or for everyone? And if they were to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles as Jesus commanded, how would they do that and what would it look like, since Gentiles couldn't enter the Temple precincts? So, at first, some argued about bringing Gentiles into the fold and later they would argue about whether converted Gentiles need to be circumcised and what other religious practices and customs they would have to adhere to.

For many early followers of Jesus it was impossible to break out of the "mine" mentality. It was as if they were prepared to "loan" God out to others, but not let others share in God's love and goodness in a full and unconditionally manner. They still saw God as theirs.

That same mentality grew in power and prestige as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine in the 4th Century. People were punished for not being Christian or for spreading beliefs that were in opposition to the Church. We, the Christians, were now the "big boys" on the block and were forcing others to conform to the rules and practices of a European culture. It was as if God were to be considered the God of the Europeans and they, the Europeans, were prepared to share God, but only by their rules, customs and perceived superior way of life.

For some, it is hard to understand how God can love everyone, just the same. We, of course, have some people in our lives that we would do anything for, even give up our lives, but there are others who we would only help in the direst of circumstances. It's as if we have created a group of concentric circles around us. As you get closer to the center of our relationships, i.e. family, the greater we feel the responsibility to love and protect. The further you get from that center, the less we care; however, God has no such circles and limitations. The Good Shepherd calls all, loves all and shepherds all, no exceptions. We are his children the sheep of his flock.

Now, I don't have to tell you that possessive feelings about God continue till this very day. One only has to listen to the rhetoric of politicians to see how the notion of being God's "chosen ones" is being fostered and exploited. For some people truly believe that God is on their side and on our American way of life, as well as, our economic and political system. Whatever we do as a nation must be right because God is on our side and loves us more, right? We see this distorted view being played out all around the world and even in our own backyard.

Take for example the issue of immigration. We see this same possessiveness being played out in our news media. Now I'm the first to say that there's no simple or easy answer to this issue, but if you have ever stood on our border with Mexico and seen that "fence", you'll understand what I'm about to say. When God looks down on that fence, what does he see? What does he think? And, if he stood on the United States side of that fence, would he turn anyone away? Again the answers and solutions aren't easy, but one thing is clear to me, this can't be the way that God intended it to be. The riches and resources that we have in the United States are not ours; they are gifts from God and are meant to be shared. How many of our ancestors came here for that very reason? They came to use their talent and energy to help their families share

in God's bounty. People were not meant to be punished simply because of where they were born.

Everything on this earth, every piece of land, every tree, every drop of oil and all the people on the planet belong to God. Now, do we believe that? And, if we do, what are we going to do about it? Mine? Ours? Hardly! It's all God's and it's time that we start living in the light of that truth.