

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020 A

Think for a moment of the things you possess, and which one or two of them are most precious to you. What is there – in your home, your garage, your pocket, your jewelry box – that you want to be sure to protect from loss or damage? For a child, it might be a beloved toy or a pet; for a teen, a cell phone; for those a bit older, maybe a ring, an heirloom, a particular photograph. *As life goes on, of course, the THINGS become less important, and the most precious elements of our lives are not things at all, but people ... spouse, children, grandchildren, friends.* We learn over time that possessions come and go; they get old, wear out, are lost or broken ... but relationships in our lives are different. This is why tragedies strike us so deeply – *it is to our credit if we can still be moved by the sorrows that affect another, for that is the very definition of mercy.* We are saddened by violence that mars lives and communities; hurricanes and fires that disrupt and destroy; lives lost in abortion or euthanasia, war and persecution, famine and neglect; the turmoil lived by those who suffer illness, loneliness, the loss of loved ones.

How timely still are Isaiah's words: "God looks for justice, but hark! The outcry." The troubles of these times unsettle us, but they also remind us that relationships are never something we can possess, demand, or control ... other people are a gift we must cherish, and how we treat them is a responsibility that has the potential to draw out the best from us, gradually forming us to love as God does. It is in caring deeply for others that we discover who we truly are, made in the image of God, Who is Love.

*To be authentic, love must begin with respect. "Surely they will respect my Son,"* says the vineyard owner in the parable. We probably have a rough and ready idea of what respect is – to feel valued, honored, cared for, as if we really matter. A few years ago, as I walked around faith formation classes, one of the teachers introduced her young students to me, *one by one, by name.* The look of joy on those children's faces, that each was known and called by name, was priceless. Even at a young age, they responded to that sense of their own dignity and value ... *"I matter, I count, I am called by name."*

The term “respect” literally means to see again, *to look with enough care to perceive the worth of what is there, in itself*, not for some purposes of our own. Respect Life Sunday each year simply asks us to pause and see persons for who they are *in themselves, regardless of their state of development or decline*. Respect says “you matter for your own sake, not for mine.” We can show signs of respect by listening to others, letting them go ahead of us, terms like “Ma’am” and “Sir.” But ultimately, respect is an *interior attitude* that values the created world and the people in it as they truly are: messengers from the Owner of the Vineyard, gifts that reflect the overflowing goodness of God. *When respect is lost, selfishness and indifference all too easily escalate to bullying, hatred, violence, even death – like the tenants in the parable and too many news stories across the years – when other people become simply obstacles in someone’s way.*

When you look in the mirror, you see an image of God. When you look at others ... spouse, brother or sister, daughter or son, perhaps the kids waiting for the bus or the guy in the car at the light ... you see there, too, an image of God, a living icon of the Trinity, a Masterpiece of God’s enduring love. Each person, no matter what their current circumstance, is a kind of sacrament, a sign pointing to the Creator, an immortal life joined to the frailty of human flesh. Things will disappear, but persons endure forever.

*We cannot resolve all the suffering and failure of respect for God and the image of God in our world, but we can choose not to add to it.* Before you send the email, repeat the rumor, make the comment, cast the vote, ask yourself ... does this build up or tear down, show respect or disrespect to those who bear the image of God? As we pray for one another and those who suffer this day, we ask the Spirit to help us show the respect God’s image deserves, so those we encounter – child or adult, friend or stranger – may realize: *“I matter, I count, I am called by name.”*