

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
St. Thomas Aquinas, Camas
July 2, 2017 - 5:00pm Vigil

What difference does it make that we are baptized Christians?

We are familiar with the saying “Blood is thicker than water.” The saying indicates that family relationships, the bonds of blood, are closer and more important than those bonds we form outside of our family. Many years ago, I heard a homily in which the priest tuned that phrase around and said that for Christians, “Water is thicker than blood.”

What he meant by this is that for us Christians, Baptism is the defining element of our identity. Those waters, in which we die with Christ and rise with him to new life, create a bond that is often stronger and closer than the blood relationships that link us to family members.

I certainly have experienced that reality in my own family and I was reminded of it this past week during our family vacation. Many of my family members do not share my faith. While they are all baptized Catholics, most of them do not go to Mass regularly and many of them have no religious affiliation.

We had a great time this past week. I enjoyed being with them, and I always look forward to spending time with them. They are all good people. At the same time, I feel somewhat disconnected from these people who are my blood relatives, and whom I love deeply. I feel much more connected to you, parishioners who I do not know as well, even those of you whose names I don't know as well as I would like to.

I am more connected to you because water - the waters of Baptism - is thicker than blood.

In today's Gospel, as Jesus prepares to send his disciples on mission, he reminds them that they have to be completely and utterly loyal to him. Love of father and mother, and son and daughter in the culture of Jesus' time was not only a bond of love, but an assurance of their identity. To love one's father and mother was to find one's identity in family roots, the most important of which for a Jew would be the family of Abraham, their father in faith.

To assure that identity continues after death, in a time when belief in an afterlife was not common, one had children in whom one would continue to live on.

Jesus says to find our identity and to seek our security in these family relationships, is not worthy of a disciple of his. In the waters of Baptism, we are buried with Christ, “so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” In this new life, we find our identity and our security in Jesus - in his death and resurrection. The waters of Baptism are thicker than the blood of family ties.

This is a hard truth and requires the carrying of a cross. This new life we have in Christ calls us to lose ourselves, our very lives, in our relationship with Jesus. And the paradox is that if we let go and place Jesus and our love for him at the center, we will gain much more than we will ever lose.

But we have another choice. We can hold on to our lives with all our might. We can grasp and hold tightly to those blood relationships and find in them our identity and our security.

That is certainly tempting for me when I spend the kind of week I just spent with my family. I love them so much. We share a history. My siblings are my link to my deceased parents. My brother’s and sisters’ children and their spouses and children, are my link to a future that will unfold long after I am gone.

But as much as those relationship and those people mean to me, there is something missing in those that don’t share our faith. And in those that do, the faith we share creates a bond in those relationships - a bond rooted not only in blood, but in the waters that create our discipleship.

I know that I am not alone in carrying this cross of loved ones who no longer practice or value the faith. So, I think it’s helpful to name this and to allow Jesus to reassure us that whatever loss we may feel will lead to gain beyond our dreams.

But there is something more that Jesus promises. He says that whoever receives a prophet, or a righteous person because they are a preacher of God’s word, that person will receive the reward of the prophet or righteous person.

Providing hospitality, simply being a good person to a disciple of the Lord, like that woman who was so hospitable to the Prophet Elisha, is rewarded. Even the simple act of giving a cup of cold water to a disciple, because they are a disciple, will be rewarded.

Our brothers and sisters, our nephews and nieces, our grandchildren and uncles and aunts who are not the intentional disciples that we are, but are good people, who treat others with love and care and respect, especially those who are followers of the Lord Jesus, those simple acts of care will have their reward.

As we gather around the Table of the Eucharist now, and invite a member of our community to this table for the first time, may we bring, in our hearts, all those relatives who do not yet share our faith. May we trust that the Lord is with them, accompanying them on their journey. And may we give thanks for the love, and the simple acts of kindness that are part and parcel of those relationships.

And may our communion with the Lord and with one another this day, strengthen us to carry the cross that calls us to relationships, to a discipleship, where water is thicker than blood.