

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Sept. 27 & 28, 2014

All Saints Church  
S. Kathy Osbelt, OSF

“Yes” from our Hearts

We revel at our house about the fact that Nick, Sister Caryn’s 14 year old nephew, has known since the age of five that he wants to pursue a career as an exterminator in Florida. He wants to crawl under houses to get rid of termites, snakes, raccoons, alligators, and whatever. The dirtier the job is the better. Though we don’t watch TV at our house, I know there is a show called “Dirty Jobs” which airs on the Discovery Channel. The host goes to some of the foulest places on earth and works with people who are either hanging from rooftops or sliding through sewers. But the host, Mike Rowe, is always showing how even the most grungy, grimy, gross job still has its own dignity. Rowe always offers respect to those who are showing him the ropes, whether it’s how to scrape up penguin poop or harvest worms. The underlying message of “Dirty Jobs” is that no matter how nasty a job is, doing it well gives a sense of well-being and worth to a person.

But there are some jobs that just seem too dirty to redeem. Jesus always reached out in relationship to the people who were caught in the mire of social conditions and who were doing these despicable jobs. Jesus himself was rejected because he reached out to these despicable ones who were supposed to be shunned and pushed outside.

Jesus not only reached out to them, but touched them and healed them: the lepers, the Gentiles, the sick and crazies, the tax collectors and prostitutes.

It reminds me of how people would cross to the other side of the street when they saw our sisters coming because the sisters gave care to those who has leprosy.

Today's Gospel focuses on the tax collectors and prostitutes. It wasn't disease or demons or not being Jewish that made them outcasts, but it was their jobs that made them despicable. Both tax collectors and prostitutes were viewed as collaborators. They profited from the despised existence and detested ruling authority of the Roman Empire.

Tax collectors brought the reality of Roman rule into the pocket of every Jewish citizen. Every action taken, every aspect of life was scrutinized and taxed by the Roman authorities. Every shekel paid was a cruel reminder of Israel's defeat, of the loss of identity and the fear of no future. This haunted the "chosen people" of God. Every time the tax collector dumped coins into Rome's coffers, Israel's hopes became emptier.

Not considering what made women go into prostitution, whether it be survival, enslavement, coercion, or economics, prostitutes, threatened the purity of Israel itself. According to Mosaic Law any child born of a Jewish mother was considered Jewish. But what happens when the "chosen people" are being created by Roman soldiers. Tax collectors were instruments used against Israel's political identity. The prostitutes were instruments used against Israel's genetic identity. Yet it is precisely these two groups that Jesus singled out and elevated above the chief priests and elders of the people.

So when the chief priests and elders came to Jesus as he was teaching in the temple and said: "By what authority are you doing these things?" Jesus replied: "Was John the Baptists baptism divine or merely human?" If they said it was divine then Jesus would ask why they didn't put faith in it. What does all that mean? John's baptism meant that you wanted to do what he said we should do, repent of our sins and instead, do good deeds. That is what is meant to be righteous, to be in right relationship with others, ALL others.

The two sons in Jesus' parable represented the two groups of people: the leaders and the outcasts. The first son, the one who said no to the

will of his father but then repented and did as was asked is like the outcast, the tax collector, the prostitute who will enter the Kingdom of God before the leaders will. Jesus said: "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the reign of God before you. When John came walking on the road of holiness, you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not repent and believe!"

So, these priests and elders, they were "Yes, men." "Yes we follow the law." "Yes, we perform every prescribed ritual". "Yes, to appearances that make us look like we are true leaders." "Yes to piety" "Yes, we are in charge of preserving the law and yes, we preserve the purity of our people." They were righteous, but only in their own opinion, not in God's. Where were their hearts, their compassion, their desire to have all be a part of the community, to have all enter the Kingdom of heaven. Where was their desire to do the will of God?

Let's think about how our response to God's desire for us to love our neighbor. Are we the first or the second son? Do we say "Yes, we believe in Jesus and in the way he taught us to love" but go about our lives that weaken or obliterate that "yes?" Are there those who we push to the margins? Are we loving and welcoming to all. How about that person that goes in front of us as we leave the church parking lot? How about the judgment we cast on the "derelict" begging on the street corner, or the members of the gangs reported in the newspaper. How about our Muslim neighbors? Have we reached out, opened our personal borders, welcomed the stranger? Works of mercy? Thoughts of love? "Yes" with our lips, or "yes" with our hearts?