

Deacon Randy Perkins
Zechariah 9:9-10
Romans 8:9, 11-13
Matthew 11:25-30

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME
Epiphany Catholic Church
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In today's first reading, we heard this prophecy from Zechariah: "See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass . . . [T]he warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."

Theologian Peter Kreeft offered this harsh but all too accurate reflection on the passage:

So what animal did Jesus deliberately choose to do the greatest deed any animal in history has ever done, to take him into Jerusalem to do the most important work any person in history has ever done, to save the human race...? He chose a stupid, stubborn little jackass. And today, he still has the same strange taste in animals that he chooses to do his work with. You can still see them today, not in zoos but in mirrors.

It's a call to simplicity. Jesus' prayer in today's gospel also spoke of how God throughout history has chosen the most simple of people to carry out the most important work: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the little ones."

Why is that? What is it about simplicity that is so appealing to God? And, as we celebrate the 250th birthday of our country, and more than 2,000 years of the Catholic church, how might we benefit from remembering to keep things simple?

To add context to Jesus' words, it's helpful to remember that when he began his ministry, the Jewish faith was significantly fragmented and divided. There were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots, the Herodians, the

Samaritans, and I'm sure other smaller factions. And they all had issues with the others!

And it's no surprise the faith had become somewhat polarized, because the law God handed down as the ten simple commandments had, at the hands of learned scholars, morphed into a complex web of 630 demanding rules to follow. The simplicity of God's law was too much for intelligent humans. It needed more structure, more direction. The result was a faith split apart at the hands of people who demanded that followers fit neatly into ideological boxes.

Had we been around during Jesus' human lifetime, we may have heard things like this: "If you don't follow both the oral and written traditions of the faith, you're not a real Jew." "Oral tradition doesn't have any religious value, and real Jews reject oral tradition and only adhere to written tradition." "If you're a real Jew, you must advocate for rising up and rebelling against the Roman army." "If you're a real Jew, then you must accept the religious authority of the Roman-appointed King Herod."

Into that divided and oppressed community, Jesus came riding a simple donkey. And he made the Mosaic law even more straightforward, preaching that all the law and the prophets could be summed up in two simple commandments: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. When his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he didn't offer anything complicated or difficult. He taught them a short and simple prayer that said everything they needed to say.

In a few minutes, we'll stand and recite the Apostles' Creed, a concise, simple statement of Christian beliefs that dates back to the 700s. In that creed, the entire Catholic faith is laid out, and for almost all Christians, there's not much disagreement about anything in it!

Yet today, with 2000 years of human wisdom, research, and refinement, the Christian faith has split into more than 20,000 Christian denominations, divided by men who've become convinced that only they have the "right" answers and everyone else is "wrong," and that those disagreements demand we can't be unified. Within our own Catholic church, today we divide ourselves—traditional and progressive, conservative and liberal—and there's always talk about the church splitting, but hardly ever are those disagreements based on any of the core foundational principles. It's the human habit of complicating what is not, at its core, complicated.

St. Thomas Aquinas is probably the most learned and wisest theologian in all of Christianity, but maybe the most profound thing he ever wrote was this: “The Creed tells us everything we need to know. The Ten Commandments tell us everything we need to do. And the Lord’s Prayer tells us everything we need to hope for and pray for.”

Christian unity doesn’t demand ideological uniformity, and disagreements among Christian believers shouldn’t be a threat to unity, but, on the contrary, should serve as an opportunity for growth and a catalyst for learning more about each other. Forcing people to pick sides, though, and demonizing people who think differently is a recipe for polarization.

As a church struggling with its identity in the 21st century, today’s gospel reminds us to keep our faith foundational, to keep it simple. Live the Christian commandments. Believe the Apostle’s Creed. Pray the prayer Jesus taught. And beyond that, make room for disagreement, and for everyone who wants to belong—with all their differences, all their opinions, all their politics, and all their gifts.

The same principle, the same rule of simplicity, is also particularly relevant to Americans today, as we celebrate the 250th birthday of the Declaration of Independence. The beauty of that wise document also lies in its straightforwardness and simplicity: All men are created equal, and all are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And like our Creed, those history-making themes from the Declaration of Independence are something virtually all Americans agree on, celebrate, and hold dear.

At the same time, let’s be honest. There’s more than a little cruel irony in the idea that those original signers could suggest with a straight face that “all men are created equal.” After all, most of those same men owned slaves, and they were proposing these new foundational ideals—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness—to a population that consisted of 20% enslaved people! How could they square that with their claim that all were equal and entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? These were imperfect men, men who made horrible mistakes, men whose ideas about human value were devastatingly wrong. Yet, in all their flawed humanity, they established ideals that have grounded our unity as a nation for 250 years.

Throughout those 250 years, very good people have had very different ideas about how we bring about a society that best honors those ideals. And that’s just as

true today as it ever was. American unity doesn't demand ideological uniformity, and political disagreements among Americans shouldn't threaten our unity; they should serve as a catalyst for growth and an opportunity for learning more about each other. Forcing people to pick sides, though, and then demonizing people who think differently, is nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt at polarizing people.

As we reflect on Jesus' consistent admonition to keep things simple, let's commit to doing the same. Live the Christian commandments. Believe the Apostles' Creed. Pray the prayer Jesus taught. And beyond that, let's make room for everyone who wants to belong—with all their differences, all their opinions, all their politics, and all their gifts.

And in terms of our American identity, may we continue to do the same—believe the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, take an active role in our civic lives, and pray for God's continued guidance. And beyond that, let's make room for everyone who wants to belong—with all their differences, all their opinions, all their religions, and all their gifts.