

No more Mr. Nice Guy! Jesus just said he's come to set the earth on fire and bring division to families – not the words of healing, loving mercy and forgiveness that we usually hear from Jesus, or his nice stories about lambs and flowers and trees. But Jesus is not about entertainment, nice ideas or getting a better vision. What he just described are the consequences from the spread of his message. That's fire and destruction to the people then in power: to the Jewish religious authorities and to the Roman Empire.

Jesus is still the Prince of Peace, but that peace comes at a price. One is for Jesus or against him. The baptism he speaks about is his suffering and death on the cross, and igniting his mission: setting the world on fire with his message of a new way of life; that makes love of God and love for neighbor a reality; hope that gives lives meaning and fulfillment; building a civilization of justice and love; and ending ego struggles, prejudice and unfairness.

This was and still is an unpopular message for the *status quo*. Early Christians often pulled away from families and friends who did not understand this new way of life, and formed a new family with other Christians. They experienced peace with one another from being united around goodness, not the peace the world gives.

With freedom of religion in the Western world today (but not in Africa, the Mideast or South Asia), we don't have to die for our beliefs, like so many of the first 16 generations of Christians did. But when we take our faith seriously, our friends and co-workers and classmates and some in our family may drop us, or ridicule us. They may think like the Romans did, that this Christian stuff is all superstition.

As uncomfortable as their reaction makes us and our kids in school feel, disciples can't just "go along to get along" with everybody. We can't let ourselves be bullied by a society that no longer welcomes Christ and blames us for everything. Faith in Christ, helping the poor, and working for fairness in business and government, are essential elements of discipleship.

This week think about: where do we draw the line? When will we speak up, even if it's unpopular? Know these things, so we're prepared for opposition or ridicule. Jesus spoke even to death because, as the Second Reading said, "For the sake of the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross." That same joy lays before us: the Resurrection. We can endure whatever contempt is dished out to us because we know we are loved by God and will be resurrected. We can bear adversity.

We tend to want to do big things for our faith. Really, it's the little things we can do that set the world on fire. St. Theresa of Avila put it so well: the devil likes to incite us to think about the great things we might someday do for God, and to forget about the good we can actually do right now.

It's like that story about a man walking on a beach in the Caribbean, and thousands of starfish had washed up on the shore. They were going to die. He sees a young boy picking up starfish one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. This man thinks it's ridiculous, because it was impossible to save all of them. He hollers at the kid: Why bother? What difference does it make? The boy threw another starfish into the water and then he turned and looked at the man and said, "I'll bet it made a difference to that one."

Two thousand years after Christ, the world is still not ablaze; it's just smoldering. Let's be united around goodness. Christ calls us to change the world, to set it on fire with his unselfish love and mercy and forgiveness. And each of us can do that, no matter how small the action seems to be.

Fr. John Ozella, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 18, 2019