

If you think being a Christian is easy, our readings today certainly throw a bit of cold water on that notion. With two stories of vineyards, we are reminded that if you are going to profess a belief in God, you have to tend the vineyard. It means you can't just show up to church, or say you believe in God - it has to manifest itself in how we live out the faith. And in a particular way, we need to think about how we treat other people. Do we welcome others and are we accepting and tolerant, going out of our way to see Christ in one another, or do we react like the people in the vineyard by ignoring others, or even worse?

That's been one of the problems we have always had as a culture, but also in our Church. Namely, the problem of judging people based on who they are, what they look like, what our perception of them is. So often we can judge people quickly based our perception of them, and exclude them from our love. But no one is excluded from God's love, for Christ came for all people.

You'd think that Christians might get this. But we are of course divided from those who have left the original church, and even within our own church, there can be big divisions as well, so that the message of the vineyard owner to love one another sometimes falls on deaf ears. But then

you have people who are the modern day prophets who worked to change attitudes.

Among these was Father Augustus Tolton, who was the first black man born in America to become a Catholic priest.

The son of Martha Jane and Peter Paul Tolton, he was born in 1854 just before the outbreak of the Civil war.

His father Peter went to Saint Louis, escaping slavery to join the Union Army. His mother then made an effort to get them from Missouri to Quincy, Illinois, a city known to be welcoming to slaves. She took Peter and his two siblings at night and while they were captured Union soldiers came to their defense and got them in a rowboat to cross the river to cross into Illinois. Some workers, black and white, gave them food from their lunch buckets and pointed the way to Quincy. When they arrived, they found there were about 300 blacks living there, and they were given help from a widow, with his mom working in a tobacco factory where Augustus, at the age of 9, would also work. But, life was quite hard despite their escape.

Augustus' older brother, Charley, died of pneumonia, and at the end of the war, the family learned that Peter had lost his life in the war.

One of the things that helped sustain the family though was their faith.

They prayed daily and sang hymns, and attended Saint Boniface Church.

Though a German parish, the priest, Father Schaeffermeyer, would read the Gospel and summarize the sermon in English out of respect for the blacks who would come to Mass gathering in a corner of the church. Augustus was also able to enroll at the parish school there.

But while some were welcoming, not all were. The problem was Augustus was the only child of color in an all-white school. Parents threatened to withdraw their children from the school; they threatened to discontinue their support of the parish, and the pastors and sisters received vicious anonymous letters. A rock was hurled through the rectory window and the gossip was that a petition was being circulated to be given to the bishop to have the priest removed. So much for a proper understanding of the Eucharist and "do unto others."

Augustus had problems at school from torment from other kids; he was called names, and teased, and he often cried. Sister Chrysolgus, a teacher there, would keep him after school to give him special lessons and to protect him from other kids wanting to torment him. Eventually he went to an all-black public school where life was hard as well.

The family then went to Saint Lawrence, an Irish parish where a strong willed Irish priest, Fr. McGirr, was supportive and got him into the school. Again there was trouble, but the Irish priest wouldn't back down. Fr. McGirr's Sunday sermons, week after week, were eloquent explanations of Christianity. "If you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to Me," and "Let the little children come unto me," and even "Depart from me into everlasting fire!" He craftily told the story of the Good Samaritan to make the listeners apply the parable to the situation. The opposition died down. Sister Herlinde arranged to give Gus additional instructions after school. At the school, he memorized the Latin Mass prayers and became an altar server. He was very devout, and would go to Mass before going to work, where he was still working in the tobacco factory. At some point, he and Fr. McGirr talked about the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood. At this time, there were no black priests in the United States. The only

problem was racism was existing in the Church as well. Fr. McGirr wrote every seminary in the country and the response was “we are not ready for a Negro student.” But to help Gus, as he was called, the priests of Quincy got together to give him instruction. Finally a few years later, the Franciscans in 1878 took Augustus as a student. And as he continued his education, Gus desired deeply to help the black people in his community. There were many who were Catholic, but many knew little about their faith or stopped going to Church. Devoted to a way of life where he went to Mass daily, was faithful to his work and studies, and helping people grow in their faith, Gus wanted to help people be free to live a life devoted to God and free them from their bondage to sin.

As such, he continued down the road to priesthood. He went to Rome in February of 1880 where he would be for the next 6 years. In seminary, he also experienced something new: no prejudice. The seminary was founded as an international seminary. Another seminarian nicknamed him Gus, and after ordination he would be known as “Good Father Gus.”

When his education was completed, a committee wanted to sent him to Africa, but at the end of the discussion the Cardinal overruled the

committee announcing: “America has been called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see whether it deserves that honor. If the United States has never before seen a black priest, it must see one now.” Admittedly, Augustus was disappointed at the time. He remembered his escape from slavery, his rejection by students, schools, even seminaries. Now he had to go back. But God calls people to be faithful, not successful.

Back home in Quincy, he worked hard at his assignment of Saint Joseph’s church, but there were problems. A big one was the poverty of the black people. Some of the children were so destitute that they came to school in the winter just to be someplace warm; shoes, clothing, and sometimes food were provided for them. Another was people persevering in the faith. People were sometimes harassed by secret societies or even clergy from other faiths. One of the worst though occurred within the Church itself. The new pastor of the nearby parish, Saint Boniface, was racist. He would refer to him using the “N” word as the “N” priest because he was upset that parishioners at his parish donated to that parish. Fr. Gus though kept trying to be optimistic, greeting all people with warmth and kindness. But this particular priest, Fr. Michael Weiss, went so far as to say money put in the basket at Saint Joseph’s belonged to white parish. And so to raise more

money for his church, Fr. Gus took speaking engagements around the country. As Fr. Weiss had more authority locally and more pull with the bishop, who told him that his mission was only to the black people of Quincy, not to whites. It finally took an appeal to a cardinal and the support of another bishop that allowed him to leave Quincy and go to Chicago, along with 19 black people he had baptized. As he left, it must have been extremely painful for him, as some gossiped that he was a failure, and the other priest told him to “get out.”

He then went to Chicago, where he ministered to the black people of the city. He made rounds day after day in foul-smelling streets and alleys; he visited people in their poverty in rat-infested tenements. He also worked to build a church for blacks in the part of Chicago where many of them lived. Thanks to some help from Mother Katherine Drexel, some \$36,000 came in to begin construction on a church. He would not live to see it's completion.

He was still relatively young in his early 40s, but it wasn't long after he was in Chicago that he became quite weak due to exhaustion from his work, suffering heat stroke. He was buried in a priest's section of a cemetery back

in Quincy. It would take another 40-50 years for parishes to become integrated both in Chicago and Quincy.

Currently, his cause for canonization is open.

What good Fr. Gus experienced certainly isn't something that was isolated to the period of the Civil War. Divisions exist all over. Racism is still there. So is the attitude of some seeing themselves as holier than others, or judging others harshly. And other times it's just being oblivious to the fact that we need to grow in our faith and living it out. Ours is not the faith for just punching a clock. Just as a vineyard requires a lot of work to prepare a harvest, the same is true with respect to our spiritual vineyard.

On the one hand, we first need to remember how much God is in love with us. Our first reading hits that point home when we are told that the owner of the vineyard, whom Isaiah calls "friend" (denoting how close we are to God) goes out of his way to not just create the vineyard and leave it, but to spade it, clear it of stones, put in a watchtower and to plant the choicest of vines. But when Israel would not respond to the gift that God has given them, there are consequences. He allows the vineyard to fail. Or so it seems.

Yes, these are the consequences of sin. And for those who reject entirely God (the vineyard owner) and the Son by embracing evil, they are cast out. But we know that in being killed, Jesus gave Himself up out of love for us all. We refer to “hell” as the absence of God, the result of a series of decisions where a person wants no relationship at all with God. More often than not though, it just takes time for a person to understand the nature of the vineyard owner. Of how much they are loved. And of how to respond to that love. While that can happen after death too, it needs to start now. The bottom line is we have to tend the vineyard. And these readings give us the chance to ask ourselves how am I responding to my commission to tend the vineyard.

What struck me with the story of Good Father Gus is that here is a man born into a very racist world. And he is raised Catholic, surrounded by Catholics. And in his life he experiences very different things from people who all profess to be Catholic. On the one hand, there’s the kindness from some of the religious sisters and nuns, and from some of the people who get to know him. There’s the people at the seminary who could care less about the color of his skin. But then there’s the people like the racist priest, or the racist parents who threaten to pull their kids from school all over the color

of a man's skin. What's going on here is that some have allowed a lot of weeds or wild grapes to grow in their vineyard. You can pick your sin, but all of us have things that need to be cleared out. So maybe a good starting point is to think about our own spiritual journey, and to think about the weeds. What is it in our lives that is preventing us from loving God as much as we should, or preventing us from returning the harvest that will be due to the vineyard owner when He shows up? Sin comes in many forms; sins of habit; sins of the flesh; sins of gossip; of racism and bigotry; of omission. The list is endless. We don't want to wallow in guilt, but on the other hand we also want to be aware of how we can always become better by overcoming sins. God gives us the tools to do that - the law, the liturgy, the sacraments, the Incarnation, the Eucharist. So let's use them.

Here's the deal though: we not only need to work on overcoming sins, we need to get to work in this world. We have to ask "what are the practical consequences of my belief?" This is what was lacking in the lives of so many that Fr. Tolton encountered. The consequence of their faith, or perhaps lack thereof, was discord, anger, greed, racism, and persecution. We need to counter that. You take people like Mother Teresa, who her whole life respected the dignity of others. In her visits to the poor, she saw as she put

it “Jesus in his most distressing disguise.” She valued the poor not because of what they could do, or their job or status, but because they are created in the image of God. When people asked her why she loved the poor so much, she would grab the person’s hand, slowly wiggle one finger at a time, and explain “you-did-it-to-me.” In her mind, you could count the Gospel on five fingers. She was alluding to the Matthew 25, where Jesus reminds us what we did for others, we do for him, but we also did not do for the stranger, the naked, and those in prison, we did not do for him too. Mother Theresa, Fr. Gus, these people recognized Jesus in every person. They helped people because they knew that in serving others, they were serving Jesus. They welcomed others to the vineyard, rather than cast them out or seeing them as a threat. That’s our challenge too: to respond to the Lord’s invitation with justice, love, peace and respect for others. To give good grapes. What do we do to God’s spokespersons? We sometimes can see God in nature, or in a beautiful cathedral, or feel the warmth of our families. But we also cannot be blind to the poor and the marginalized; to injustice in the world, and also must strive to see God even when it’s tough in the people we may not like. What strikes me with Fr. Gus is here is someone who could have been filled with anger for what happened to him. But he did not retaliate with hate for the hate he received. Instead he loved, and in the process

brought Jesus into a very dark world. When we follow that path, we too can do the same.

Though we have a 7 a.m. Mass now, I will say I have no intention of starting a 4:30 a.m. Mass. But that was something that Mother Teresa and her sisters did every day to start the day. For them, the liturgy, the Eucharist in particular, was key to living out seeing Christ in all. In the Eucharist, Jesus becomes present under the form of ordinary bread and wine. When the priest says the words of consecration, Christ becomes substantially present even though he's not evident to our senses. Our faith helps us transcend sensory experience to spot the divine image in its most ordinary form.

Mother Teresa knew how crucial this was. Seeing Christ in the Eucharist enabled her to see him in the streets. "If we recognize [Jesus] under the appearance of bread," she explained, "we will have no difficulty recognizing him in the disguise of the suffering poor." This is why Mother Teresa could say, "I have an opportunity to be with Jesus 24 hours a day." Whether in the chapel or the slums, the pew or the hospital, she recognized the Lord everywhere she went because she trained herself each morning at the altar. We are workers in God's vineyard, the beautiful world He created and gave us to cultivate. Will we see the new people God sends to us and welcome

them into the vineyard? Or will we cast them out? We cast out the Son of God, but God did not give up on us. The one we rejected is the one who is given back to us as a source of life - something we will shortly celebrate.

May we like Fr. Gus, like Mother Teresa and all of the saints, base our lives on Jesus the cornerstone, and cultivate the vineyard.