

There is not many times that all the readings for the weekend come together in a common theme. This weekend it seems we are able to bring all three readings together into a kind of common thread. We could take a little from each reading and make a summary of all of them into one.

From the first reading, we could take “You shall not oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourself.” From the second reading, we can take “you became imitators of us and of the Lord, so that you became a model for all believers.” And from the gospel we use “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Let me tell you two stories and see if you can tie them together with the readings.

My wife has an uncanny knack of helping complete strangers and turning them into friends. One time while she was at work in Wal-Mart, a young couple came up to her and the man was looking for a pair of orange shorts. She took the request in stride and began a conversation with them. She found out they were students at St Norbert’s College and that they were from the Ukraine.

Well they gave Joan their telephone number and we all got together and met. We found out their names were Michael and Oksana.

It was near Christmas time and we found out that they were just a little homesick and were sad not to be with their families for the holidays. So we invited them over to spend some time with our family.

About the same time, I went to a seminar and one of the speakers was from the Ukraine. I asked her what might be some meal we could prepare that would be good for our newfound friends. She gave me some ideas and then told me something that would make them feel at home.

She said to bake some bread into a ring and place it on a dish with a small bowl of salt in the middle of the ring. We were to offer it to them as they walked into our house. It seemed like a strange thing to do but we thought we would try it.

The day arrived that they came to our house and we offered the bread and salt platter to them. Oksana seemed to look at it in disbelief and Michael looked shocked at the plate presented to him. I could see a tear in his eye and thought to myself did I do something wrong and I ask them if they were ok. Michael asked how could we have known that this is how family and friends would welcome each other into their homes in their country and that it was the first time they felt at home in this country. After we ate Michael seen a guitar we had and ask if he could play it, and we were treated to songs from their homeland. A few weeks later, they joined us at Midnight Mass and we became family.

My second story is about Carmen Sanchez, the wife of one of my fellow deacons, Luis Sanchez. Carmen had gone to Mexico to visit her family when she had a major stroke. She was paralyzed on one side of her body and was unable to speak. By the time she was able to come back home to Green Bay she was having a hard time walking , was not able to use one of her hands, and still had problems with her speech.

I had talked with Luis a few months after Carmen had gotten back and he told me she was really depressed and having a hard time. I mention to Luis that I was having a prayer service with the kindergarten and 1st grade and that we would be praying for her. I told Luis that if she felt up to it she was most welcome to come to the service. He did not think she could but he would keep it in mind.

I revealed to Luis that the two classes had made some gifts for Carmen and we would send them to her after the service. The day of the prayer service as we were getting ready to start, some of Carmen's family walked into church with Carmen walking with a cane. I asked Carmen's brother in law to do one of the readings in Spanish and then I did it in English.

Toward the end of the service, the children presented Carmen with the gifts they made and some roses. Then the two classes came over by her, held out their hand and sang a blessing over her. Even though she could not speak well, the tears

in her eyes said it all. I talked with Luis a few weeks after the prayer service and he told me that it was after that day that Carmen started to recover at an amazing rate. He told me that the prayers of the children were just what she needed to strengthen her faith as well as her body.

Our religious tradition is founded in love, we come from a God who is love, so it is in our very nature to love and be loved. We may sometimes think it is easier to love God than to love others. It may actually be just the opposite; we show we love God by loving what God loves. If our love is as giving as God's love, we will care for the widows, orphans, and aliens. We will feed the hungry, visit the sick, aid those who are suffering, and make certain that we have a healthy environment for those who come after us.

Love is the groundwork of the reign of God, and it is infectious. When we love others, the reign of God will spread around the world. Kindness shown to others is a form of evangelization, proclaiming louder than any words could ever do that the reign of God has been established. This brings us to the questions of the week.

What actions or visible characteristics of your life-style have the most influence on others?

How can you make sure that your actions bear witness to the values Jesus lived and taught?