

4th Sunday of Advent 2013

Last week some neighborhood people gathered in the Rainbow room to set a direction for our neighborhood, I was in a small group discussing what kind of values we wanted in our square mile. One of the members of our group was a ten year old boy who, when asked to say what he wanted in his community, quickly answered, “Get rid of the bad people!” We never found out whether “bad people” were drug users, bullies or just ill tempered people. All he said is that he wanted to get rid of them.

Well that is exactly what Joseph faced in today’s gospel. He just wanted to “get rid”of Mary since she was with child before they had lived together. In Jesus’ time the normal way of getting rid of a woman found pregnant to whom you were engaged is to have a public hearing and disgrace her. But, Joseph, being a man of honor, decided to just move her along quietly.

And that is exactly what he decided to do until an angel in a dream spoke to his heart giving him a whole new take on his situation. This child was born of the Spirit and was to free his

people, Israel. Yes, God spoke to Joseph's heart. The angel said, "It is by the Holy Spirit that Mary is with child.

And so, instead of getting rid of her, he took Mary into his home and raises the child with care. We know the rest of the story.

Now let's go back to that young boy who just wanted to get rid of the bad people in his neighborhood. While Joseph had an angel to help him see things more clearly, the ten year old boy had a wise mother who was with him at the meeting. She began to tell him how things were when she was growing up in the neighborhood, how everybody on the block knew each other, cared for each other and looked out for each other. As she talked, the boy began to see a new way of looking at his situation in life.

I don't know about you, but I have a few of those bad people who complicate my life I would like to get rid of. We all have been in a situation similar to Joseph or this ten year old boy. We are afraid of something in life. We pray to God to get rid of the problem for us. We say to God, "Take it away! Remove it!"

There are times we all look for a God of magic to instantly remove the pain and struggle. But God does not act that way. Rather, God decided to come into our midst, be born among us and then challenge us to create a community of care which can confront, embrace and transform our problem.

Last Saturday, that boy was fortunate to be in the in the midst of twenty people who are committed to embrace our neighborhood and transform it into community of care. The same is true in our own journey of life. Whether it is in our households / or our neighborhoods / or our schools / or our workplaces, we are all called to form relationships which will bring the care and mercy of the Lord to every situation we find ourselves in.

It is not that hard to do. First, we need to put on the mind and heart of Jesus. We must be close to the Word of God to understand his Son, absorb his Word, plant his way of living deep in our hearts. Second, we need to enter into a community which reflects the love and care which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has. Finally, we need to get much more creative in forming those communities in our families, neighborhoods schools and work places.

(examples of “dealing with a problem” by the pope and in our neighborhood)

The other day I was listening to a young community organizer from Argentina who works with a lot of neighborhood groups in Detroit. Her experience is that the most life-giving groups who call forth the best in us are found in urban life are found primary in one setting...and that setting is church communities. Faith communities are the places where people flock to find warmth, community and hope. And she also noted that the more devastated the neighborhood is, the more the church becomes that beacon of hope.

My brothers and sisters, we are followers of Christ; as followers of Christ, our mission is to form communities of care in all the realms of our life.

Joseph would spend the rest of his life caring for “his problem”. Because he was a man of prayer, he accepted the call from the Lord to form a small community of care in which the savior could grow in wisdom and age and grace. Joseph’s problem ended up to be the source of his salvation. And so I ask you today, What is your problem? By the grace of God, our problem may well be the source of our salvation.