

June 30, 2013 – 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Sister Theresa Baldini, MM, South Sudan

1 Kings 19:16, 19-21; Galatians 5: 1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62

In today's reading, Luke begins the most important major section of his gospel, the "journey narrative." Some 15 times he reminds us, as here for the first time, that Jesus "set his face to go on to Jerusalem." Many instructions and sayings of Jesus, scattered elsewhere by the other evangelists, will be drawn into this journey narrative. Luke's journey narrative is just that, a symbolic way, a literary tool to combine several journeys, Jesus' and our own, through the mystery of life-death-new life.

The liturgy today does a balancing act. The episode from the life of Elijah and Elisha is not intended to contrast with the gospel. Elisha is permitted to return to say farewell to his parents, a request which Jesus turned down. Normally we are permitted to perform such human courtesies; indeed we are obliged to do so. On another occasion Jesus would not accept as a follower anyone who refused to honor their parents and care for them (Matthew 15:4-6). Yet rare moments come when even parents may obstruct what is clearly God's will, which is a person's wellbeing.

The second reading provides the most help in reaching a balanced position from which to make a good judgment. Paul begins: "For freedom Christ has set us free ... [Y]ou were called to freedom, [but not a freedom] for self-indulgence." Flesh, for Paul, refers to human weakness and selfishness. Paul sees the fulfillment of the law in this one saying: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When I first went to Narus, South Sudan with another sister to begin a simple prayer and peace presence in a war zone, the bishop introduced us to the people. One of the Sudanese women, Anna, asked me: "What tribe are the two of you?" Spontaneously, I said that my companion is from the New Jersey tribe and I am from the New York tribe. Anna seemed perplexed. She said: "Do you live together?" I said: "Yes, we live gratefully together." I shared with Anna that our Maryknoll community has members from many different tribes and we live and work together in mission as a family. The next day the bishop brought us around the town of Narus where there were over 40,000 displaced Sudanese people, representing about 10 different tribes from all over South Sudan, each tribe living in separate compounds, and Anna and her family were among the displaced. The people worked together but each tribe lived separately.

Anna came often to our place for prayer and to share with us. After a year or so, during one of our gatherings with the women from the area, she said that the name of our dwelling – "House of Prayer & Peace" – challenged her "to strive to become prayer and peace." She went on to say: "The two sisters here are from different tribes. If I can become prayer and peace, I, too, can peacefully live together with other tribes, all being part of one family."

Another Sudanese woman, Esther, helped me in learning the modified Arabic language that was the *linga franca* in South Sudan. There were moments when I felt so frustrated trying to pronounce the Arabic words with my New York accent. Esther looked sympathetically at me and asked: "Why do you want to learn a new language?" It seemed to me like a strange question, and I said that I wanted to be able to speak in a way that people can understand me. Esther gently said that my response was only a small part of learning a language, and that we learn a new language primarily to be so present to another person that the other person experiences he or she is being understood. Esther gave me a new consciousness of what it means to be a presence in mission wherever we are. I readily went out to meet anyone who came to our dwelling, immediately slipping my hand into the person's, holding the person's hand in such a way that I could feel the pulse beating. My whole focus was that the person experienced she or he was being understood, giving one another a sense of belonging, a sense of presence.

Anna and Esther reflect Jesus' and Paul's challenge: Love your neighbor as yourself. In the time of Jesus, ordinarily the Samaritans and Jews were not friends. Jesus teaches us that we can never dislike anyone we really know, and as one of the Sudanese women shared, "an enemy is anyone whose story I do not know or do not want to know." Jesus came to break down any barriers that keep us from knowing and loving one another, and being open to forgiving hurts of the past. This is what gives us wings to fly, an inner freedom that allows us to be among those who are becoming a communion of people who are accepting, nurturing and encouraging the maximum diversity among us.

Like Jesus, we are called to become servants of Love. So many times in my life I have seen a person bending over another in love, in service of the sick or those wounded in some way. We are each called to be an energy field of Love. This presence of love becomes the essence of service. It is the Presence of the Christ to all my sisters and brothers – to all creation – the Christ, bowing low in complete self-gift as he journeys with each of us.

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