

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr. A
February 19, 2017
Father Mike Holloran

Driving home from Blanchester on Saturday evenings, I've discovered a radio station that replays "America's Top 40" from years gone by. Last week the featured year was 1985, and I heard a song I don't think I've heard since then – "We Are the World".

We are the world, we are the children,
We are the ones who make a better day so let's start giving.
There's a choice we're making, we're saving our own lives,
It's true we'll make a better day, just you and me.

Kind of brings back some memories, doesn't it? And do you remember the most interesting thing about the song? It was produced as a charity benefit for African famine relief, and was sung by Michael Jackson, and Lionel Ritchie, and Ray Charles, and Billy Joel, Cyndi Lauper, Bruce Springsteen, Smokey Robinson, Willie Nelson, Kenny Rogers, and about forty more superstars of popular music, all in the recording studio at the same time!

People wondered how it was pulled off. Lining up that many busy schedules would be nearly impossible, to say nothing of getting cooperation from that many prima dons and Donnas. But it was for a good cause, the instigators were well-respected, and there was a note at the entrance to greet them all as they arrived: "Check your egos at the door." To emphasize the point, Stevie Wonder announced that if the recording was not completed in one take, he and Ray Charles were going to drive everyone home. That surely helped, but I think it was the note: "Check your egos".

Ah yes, the human ego, that imperious "I"-- source of so much discontent and trouble. Jeremiah was on to something when he said, "More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9)

Jeremiah was a prophet, and prophets see things with a clarity that others lack, and don't always welcome. So the prophet meets resistance. Some just can't quite imagine that there could really be consequences to their folly. We may be \$20 trillion in debt, but the sky hasn't fallen yet, so why worry? Others think they can stay ahead of disaster and by playing their cards right even come out ahead while everybody else is caught in a food riot at the grocery.

"More tortuous than all else is the human heart (the human ego), beyond remedy, who can understand it?"

Jeremiah may have been verbally throwing up his hands in exasperation, but I think we all understand the ego needs of the human heart. We all have one, after all. We each have an innate sense that by ourselves we aren't enough. Baby needs her parents, so she learns how to keep them compliant.

A youth needs friends, so he learns to go with the flow. As we move through life we continue to seek from others what we lack ourselves, often in the form of money; but money is just a stand-in for something more fundamental-- affirmation.

Most people manage these adjustments pretty well, trimming their egos to the needs of others, learning that money and applause are poor measures of personal worth. But if in our experience our personal worth depends completely on performance, if we never feel affirmed just because we are, then we continually crave and pursue those substitutes-- money, fame-- which the world gives in return for performance. And a star is born.

No wonder we greet our brothers only, love those who love us, and hate our enemies. It's because we think that if we don't look out for ourselves no one else will, we won't have what we need, and if we don't have what we need we die. The lonely, dependent, craven ego misunderstands many things, but does see one thing clearly-- by itself it is not enough.

Not so the Almighty. The universe in which we live, of which we are a part, necessarily has a Creator, and that Creator is necessarily enough. God the Creator is infinite, self-sufficient, the eternal source, the unlimited supply, the unavoidable but completely fulfilling destination.

God doesn't need anything, so He doesn't need to look out for #1. He has no competitors, no rivals. God suffers no loss by allowing his sun to shine on the bad and the good. He doesn't come up short by allowing his rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Creation is not a zero sum game, where if someone else gets it, I don't.

God cannot lose by providing as our heavenly Father; we can only gain by becoming His children. All that God has He wants us to have, and so He pardons our iniquities, heals our ills, redeems us from destruction, and crowns us with kindness and compassion. Yes, the crowning touch in our re-creation by grace is that the mercy of God reproduces itself in the forgiven soul.

Crowned with God's compassion, secure in our identity as His own children, alive with His Holy Spirit, we see others as He does, and treat them accordingly-- loving our enemies, praying for those who persecute us-- because being God's children is not a zero-sum game. God's loving-kindness is in infinite supply, and we receive it more and more the more we give it away.