

Twenty-Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)
St. Joseph's Neier October 18-19, 2014
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: The call of the gospel often times means going against the prevailing politics of the day and seeking integrity in the Spirit of God.

*For our gospel did not come to you in word alone,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.*

The year was 1947.

Seventeen years before it would become the law of the land. Ten years before Fr. Kevin was born. Seven years before it a landmark Supreme Court decision. Two old white men would change the discussion about race relations forever. Both of them would impact my life directly.

But before I tell you who they were, a little background is in order. The recent troubles in Ferguson have a long history. What we miss in the discussion is that the Michael Brown shooting is not an isolated incident. Rather it is the tip of a very large and troublesome iceberg. That may or may not be fair to the individuals involved, but it is real and it is at the heart of why this topic simply won't go away.

St. Louis has a long history of troubled race relations, going back to the moment when, because of the Missouri Compromise, we were admitted into the United States as a slave state. Of course, Missouri was also the site of the landmark Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, as divisive of a ruling as Roe vs. Wade in the 1970's. During the Civil War, Missouri was one of three states which had representation both in the Union and in the Confederate legislatures (for trivia freaks, Maryland and Kentucky were other two). With an influx of African Americans into St. Louis in the 1930's, St. Louis had the sad distinction of being one of the most segregated cities in the United States. I remember growing up and almost knowing exactly which streets and neighborhoods the lines were between black and white neighborhoods. In short, this was not started by the shooting of Michael Brown.

Which brings me to my two white men. The first was a man by the name of Branch Rickey. A one time baseball player himself, Rickey was a tireless innovator of the game developing such things that our common today like the batting cage, pitching machines, and batting helmets. He also pioneered the use of statistical analysis in baseball (what is now known as sabermetrics). But Rickey's greatest contribution to the game was his hiring of Jackie Robinson, an African American, as the first of his race to play Major League Baseball.

The batting cage was a bit less controversial. Robinson faced the scorn of a great number of people who saw this innovation as the virtual end of civilization as we know it. And no place was more rabid, more vocal, let's face it, just plain meaner in its treatment of Robinson as was good old St. Louis. You have to remember, with the possible exception of Cincinnati, St. Louis was the furthest southern Major League city in the league. But Rickey's bold move was not lost on a young man, fresh back from World War II, newly married and with a new daughter on the way who lived in that city. He was impressed by Rickey's courage and openness to change the culture. And even though he was born and raised in St. Louis, from 1947 on, he was a Dodger fan, so much so that we buried my father in his Dodger jacket.

1947 also saw a change in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. Cardinal Glennon, who was not exactly known as "forward thinking" on the matter of race, died suddenly on a trip to Ireland. His replacement was the bishop of Indianapolis and the very first thing he did in St. Louis, angered a large portion of the Catholic population, so much so, that they threatened to take him to court over the issue. But Joseph Ritter, also known as Cardinal Ritter, was not a man who was easily intimidated. Ritter came into one of the most segregated communities in the United States and in one swift bold (and yes) unilateral move integrated the Catholic schools in the Archdiocese. Nowadays we take that for granted, but in 1947 it was extremely audacious and very controversial. Ritter got lots of angry fan mail. And a group of Catholic parents threatened to take him to court for violating the laws of the state of Missouri. It got ugly.

So what did Ritter do? Well, he played the excommunication card. He had a letter read in every parish in the archdiocese stating that if any Catholic took him to court over this, they would not be able to receive the sacraments. The lawsuit was dropped and the schools were integrated, seven years before Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, KS. His rationale?

"The cross on top of our schools must mean something," and what it means is "the equality of every soul before Almighty God."

Our area is facing a soul searching time. Yes, it is troubling. Yes, various people have various opinions about it. La-de-da! But let me take it in a different direction. This could be a great opportunity, for our area, for our community, for our church. It is an opportunity to look honestly and openly at the issue of race, think deeply about our own prejudices and seek a way of peace and harmony, even in the midst of conflict and distrust.

Will this journey be disturbing? Probably. It wasn't easy for Rickey. It wasn't easy for Ritter. But just a quick scan of the history of this issue should tell us that it is a journey worth taking. All through this time I have tried to put myself in the position of Michael Brown's father. The truth is that both he and the police officer Darren Wilson *are* my

brothers, *are* my family. Once we begin to see that, we see with new eyes, eyes that see crushing sorrow, but eyes that also see new hope.

St. Paul reminds us that we are called to be people of the gospel, not just in word alone, but in power and conviction. And in that power and conviction, we will find the way to peace, so that the crosses we wear, the crosses we place on our walls at home and in our churches and that the crosses on top of our schools, might mean something.