

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 2.5.17

Isaiah 58:7-10/1 Corinthians 2:1-5/

Matthew 5:13-16

PRONOUNCE THE WORDS & UNDERSTAND THEIR MEANING

It happened at an Applebee's restaurant in Coon Rapids, Minnesota, just over a year ago. Asma Jami was having dinner with her family. They were speaking in Swahili, their native language. As they were chatting, a customer at a nearby table got increasingly agitated. She resented that they were speaking Swahili and not English. "Speak English or get out of the country!" the angry woman demanded. Asma, a Muslim who wears the traditional hijab head covering, calmly explained that she was a U.S. citizen and her children were born here and that, with her elderly parents, they speak Swahili. But before Asma could finish, the woman picked up a beer mug and smashed it into Asma's face.

The attacker ran away, but Applebee's employees chased her and later police took her into custody. Asma needed 17 stitches on her face and lip. She still has scars that she tries to cover up with makeup. For a long time after the attack Asma was too frightened to leave her house. She feared for her family's safety. She even considered moving away from Minnesota. But, over time, she managed to overcome her fear. Asma appeared in court a few weeks ago to hear the woman plead guilty to third-degree assault. As part of the plea agreement, the woman had to admit to the bias-motivated attack, serve three months in jail and five years probation, as well as pay restitution.

In an extraordinary presentation to the court, Asma addressed the woman who struck her. The young American Muslim woman said in part: *"My religion teaches me to forgive so I can get on with my life. If I hold a grudge, if I hold the hate you hold towards me against you, it's not going to*

serve me well. So, in front of everybody here, I do forgive you and I hope that you choose love over hate . . . Having hate just eats at you, it's not good. I hope you find what you're looking for at the end of your journey. I know you've had just as long of a year as I've had . . . I don't have any ill feelings towards you. I just want you to understand at the end of all this that we are all the same. It doesn't matter what's on my head, it doesn't matter the color of my skin - we are all the same human beings, we are fighting for the same rights. I am an American citizen and I would fight for it today as much as you would."



Why would it bother a person to hear someone speaking another language? I've always admired people who know more than one language. In fact I have to admit my jealousy of them. Growing up in a Polish community in Ohio, I heard another language every day. My paternal grandfather only spoke Polish and my grandmother only knew enough English to get by at the corner grocery store. When my parents and adult relatives didn't want my sisters and me to know what they were talking about, they simply slipped from English into Polish. Our Masses were in both Polish and English, so I learned prayers and church hymns in Polish. This is the Polish hymnal I grew up with called a *Spiewnik*. I can read and sing the words so well, you'd think I had been born in Krakow. The only problem is I learned how to pronounce the words... but not what they mean. And that can be a problem in our faith as well.

We can pronounce the words of scripture [the Prophet Isaiah: *Share your bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless; clothe the naked when you see them...*]; We can sing the words of a hymn [*Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live...*]; We can proclaim the words of our prayers [*I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth...Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...*]; but do we know and believe what those words mean?

And not only what they mean, but their implications for living each day as a Christian, a follower of Jesus? we who are called to make the presence of Jesus alive in our world? we whom Jesus calls the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” who are commanded to let our light shine so that others may see our good deeds and give praise to our Heavenly Father?



Asma Jami's courageous offering of forgiveness is the "salt" and "light" that Jesus challenges all of us to be. Until our hopes for justice become our work for justice, until our prayers for peace and unity in the world are first lived in our own home and community, until our professed belief in God as Father of all affects every one of our relationships, we are as good as flavorless salt, we are as useful as light hidden away under a basket. May we possess Asma Jami's humility and grace to realize our vocation to be salt for those desperate to

realize the joy and hope of God's presence; may we be light to a world that has lost its way in the cloud of fear and discrimination, in the darkness of violence and injustice.

Father John Kasper, OSFS