

St. Francis University
Red Mass – Friday, April 27, 2012
Homily

There are a number of stories about Abraham Lincoln when he was a country lawyer before being elected to public office.

In one story, Lincoln was defending a farmer who was involved in a dispute with another farmer. The issue was supposedly under dispute for a long time.

The two farmers did not trust and did not believe the other. Even though they were geographic neighbors in virtue of their adjacent farms, their prolonged discord prevented them from being neighbors in the best and true sense of that word.

By the time Lincoln became involved, these two farmers could not even address each other without resorting to insults and name-calling.

In an effort to provide a basis for a more reasoned discussion and an eventual resolution of the dispute, Lincoln suggested to the farmer that there might be some facts of the case that could be stipulated by the parties.

Lincoln's client was unconvinced by Honest Abe's assessment of the dispute. He thought his attorney was more favorable to the version of the facts as presented by the Plaintiff.

In an attempt to convince his client that there were some basic facts about the case that should be accepted as true, Lincoln decided to illustrate by using an example that the farmer might appreciate.

So Lincoln asked, "A cow has how many legs?" The farmer replied, "Everyone knows a cow has four legs."

"That's right," said Lincoln. "Now suppose you call the cow's tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have?"

"Why, five, of course," was the farmer's confident reply.

"Now, that's where you're wrong," said Lincoln. "Calling a cow's tail a leg does not make it a leg."

You may be familiar with the maxim attributed to the 1st century BC writer Publilius Syrus:

- *Nimium altercando veritas amittitur.*
- Truth is apt to be lost when there is too much altercation or prolonged dispute.

In a reflection on this maxim, one author observed that in protracted disputes, people tend to forget or lose sight of themselves and the substance of the dispute.

That's an observation worth thinking about, especially in light of the Word of God we just heard in the readings from Sacred Scripture.

I should tell you that the sacred readings for this Red Mass are the readings provided by the Ordo of the Church for this day in the third week of Easter (Acts of the Apostles 9:1-20; Gospel of John 6:52-59). They were not chosen especially for today's celebration. However, I am convinced that sometimes we are better off by allowing the Word of God for the day speak to us, rather than choose something that may be a more comfortable fit for the occasion.

You may have noticed that the story of the conversion of St. Paul (originally known as Saul) in the Acts of the Apostles, and Jesus' discourse in the Gospel involve a considerable amount of dispute. In both cases, those caught up in the disputes had lost sight of themselves and the substance of the dispute.

The Gospel story begins by describing the Jews in the synagogue as quarreling among themselves. Based on their reaction it appears that Jesus might have been more successful in trying to convince them that a cow has five legs than getting them to appreciate how they can eat his flesh and drink his blood and thereby have eternal life.

Their reaction is like the reaction that is becoming more and more noticeable in public discourse today, especially whenever matters of faith or religion are brought into the discussion.

The Jews in the synagogue in Capernaum were unable to grasp the astounding teaching of Christ. Among the reasons for this difficulty was their jumping into the debate, the quarrel among themselves rather than listening to the truth that Jesus was attempting to share with them.

They lost sight of the topic. Jesus was trying to tell them about eternal life, and they couldn't get past the "who does he think he is," and the extraordinary if not outrageous proposition that they should eat his flesh.

I will come back to that truth in a moment. First, it is worth noting that the setting for the quarrel, the debate, the dispute that went on is significant. It took place in a synagogue where the elders of the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin, would listen to an excerpt from the Torah, the law, and then a reading from one of the Prophets that corresponded to the law, and then they would "discuss" it.

It was not unusual for disputes, or debates, or quarrels to erupt. Get a room full of legal experts together and there are bound to be differences of opinion. And there is the main issue in the dynamics of that exchange. The question is: When is the dispute about a matter of opinion, and when is it about truth?

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the story of the conversion of Saul. He was the self-appointed special prosecutor who was going after the so-called followers of the Way, which is what the early Christians were called.

In the very first lines of the text we learn where Saul was coming from. He was already so enraged, that he was "breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord." In order to take it a step farther, he sought letters from the high priest of the Temple in Jerusalem so that he could go to the synagogues in Damascus.

By going into the synagogues, Saul would be entering into the places where disputes and quarrels were part of what they did. However, Saul wasn't looking to take part in the ongoing disputes and quarrels about the Torah, about the Jewish laws, and about the teachings of the Prophets.

Saul would have been very good at that because he was trained as a rabbi. He was qualified to sit on the bench with the Jewish elders who participated those discussions.

Saul was beyond all that. He had heard enough of the dispute. He was way past the point of discussing whether a cow has five legs if you include the tail.

Saul had already lost sight of himself and the substance of the dispute. He wanted to take matters into his own hands. The only thing that kept him from being labeled a vigilante is the “authorization” that he received in the letters from the High Priest. With the arrest warrant signed by the High Priest, Saul was in the right to round up the Christians.

Then something amazing happened. Saul got knocked off his high horse. The most significant thing is that he was blinded. That is an interesting fact, because Saul had already lost sight of himself and the subject of the dispute.

We can only imagine how unnerving it must have been for Saul to go immediately from his furious activity of bullying and even persecuting others to being made so vulnerable.

I will never be able to comprehend how Saul could undergo such a radical conversion. He went from being engaged in a reign of terror to being engaged in proclaiming the reign of God.

What I do know, is that after getting Saul’s attention, Jesus captured Saul’s heart. It didn’t occur through violence or persecution; instead it occurred through Word and sacrament.

Ananias shared the Word of God with Saul in a way that Saul had never listened to it before. It was the Word of God that is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. It says that as Saul listened to Ananias, things like scales fell from his eyes as Saul recovered his sight.

Saul, who had lost sight of himself from having engaged so long and furiously in the dispute, could see himself again and he could see more.

Saul could also see the truth and that truth is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who in very plain words has revealed to us that he, the Lord Jesus, is the way, the truth and life.

Then Saul was baptized and as a result he began to follow the Way. Interestingly, one of the last details of the story of Saul's conversion is that he did go to the synagogues.

However, instead of going there to persecute those who were beginning to follow Jesus, Paul went to the synagogues to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God.

What Paul previously believed to be heresy, he now recognized as the truth; and he could he could not contain himself in sharing the truth with others.

As I reflect on the Gospel reading, I can't help but wonder what it must have been like for Saul to go to those synagogues after his conversion. From that point on, he was on the other side of the dispute. Saul would be the protagonist; trying to convince anyone who would listen that the Way to eternal life involves eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of God.

Every time we come to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, as we do in this Red Mass today, we listen to the Word of God. We hear a message that at times can be just as challenging for us as a country lawyer trying to explain to a farmer that "calling a cow's tail a leg does not make it a leg."

Every time we come to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, as we do in this Red Mass today, we come to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of God in this sacrament.

Every time we come to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, as we do in this Red Mass today, we should be aware that its potential impact in our lives is just as dangerous as what Jesus or Saul experienced in the synagogues.

You and I come here because we are convinced that in this Eucharistic celebration we can find the truth

- About ourselves;
 - That as part of our nature we have the capacity to know the truth
 - The truth about our dignity and identity, which is God-given
- About God who wishes to fill us and satisfy us with his life
- About the world in which we live and the way we are to live in it
- About the eternal world, the Kingdom of Heaven, which is our final destiny.

Disputes and discord and altercations have been going on throughout the ages, and the subject of those disputes and discord and altercations may change depending on the circumstances of time and place.

In the midst of too much dispute, we can lose sight of ourselves, of who we are; that we are made in the image and likeness of God; and redeemed in the image and likeness of Jesus.

In the midst of too much dispute, we can lose sight of the truth; Jesus the Christ who is the way, the truth, and life.

There is an axiom in ancient Roman law: *Nimum altercando veritas amittitur*. Truth is apt to be lost when there is too much altercation or dispute. It will not get us very far if we spend all of our time trying to convince ourselves or others that a cow has five legs by calling the tail a leg.

I encourage you to ponder the implications of all this in your lives as Catholics who are involved in learning, teaching, discussing, applying, enforcing, or making the law of our land.

Please remember that in the end, we are the beneficiaries of the enduring and unchanging truth revealed to us by God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For some it may be a challenge and for others it may be a sheer joy to hear that Christ invites, encourages, and pleads with us to receive the very source of all truth by eating his flesh and drinking his blood; by consuming him in order to be consumed by the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

For all of us it should be the most important food for thought today.