

7th Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Lesson from a Salesman”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, it is almost unnecessary to preach a homily on this weekend's Gospel simply because the Gospel reading preaches itself. As I was praying about Jesus' sermon, it feels like Jesus is expanding the “golden rule” in fuller detail, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This Sunday, Jesus tells us that the golden rule still applies even when we are dealing with our enemies. It is remarkable. And as I prayed harder about it, the thought that came back to me over and over was one of the formulations of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: I shall never treat another human being as a means to an end but rather as an end unto himself. It is a mouthful but I'll say it again, I shall never treat another human being as a means to an end but rather as an end unto himself. What does he mean by that?

The reason why this version of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative came to mind is because this idea gives us a practical way to live the golden rule with others and apply it even to our enemies. You see, all too often we can fall into the trap of treating other human beings as a means to whatever end we are pursuing rather than as the children of God that they are. Those who are successful in business, or want to be successful, understand what I am talking about. If a salesperson treats their customers solely as a means to an end, namely a paycheck, over time they usually do not do very well at sales because no one likes to be treated that way. Successful salespersons are those who are interested in finding out first what their customers really need and then meet their need in a fair and respectful way. They treat their customers like human beings, like ends unto themselves rather than a means to an end. And they get repeat business as a result and word of mouth will always keep them busy. Do you follow?

Jesus gives us an example of this in our Gospel reading today drawing from the marketplace of his time. He likens God to a flour salesman who, instead of charging you the same amount for a simple scoop of flour in your bag, instead goes the extra mile by shaking the bag and pack it down so to make more room and repeat the process until their customer's bag is overflowing with flour. That flour salesman would be more popular and more successful in the marketplace because he treats his customers the way we would all like to be treated, as a human being and an end unto himself, rather than a mere means to an end.

I think a lot of modern-day businesses get it, the successful ones anyway. Before I entered seminary, something like 30 years ago, I did a stint as a customer care representative for a company called Western Wireless in Bellevue. This was in the day when cell phones were either the size of bricks or were carried around in a bag. Before they let us start working the phones to help customers, they had us attend a seminar that lasted for days on customer service. And the one thing I remember from that seminar was an interesting admission from the company leadership. They said that there was no real difference in the technology and cell phone range between Western Wireless and our competition at the time. They said that the company that survives over time will be the one that has better customer service. We were therefore instructed to treat the people we are serving over the phones like family. We were also told that our calls were being recorded so to be on our best behavior. That company grew and became T-Mobile. The founder and owner of that company was John Stanton, who is now the CEO for the Seattle Mariners.

The insight however that good business rests on the idea of having the best customer service reminded me of that flour salesman Jesus is referring to in our Gospel reading. There could be a dozen flour salesmen in the marketplace during Jesus' time. The flour salesman everyone was going to line up in front of is the guy that shakes the bag, packs it down, and makes sure the bag is overflowing, because that guy is treating you the way we all want to be treated, like a human being and end unto himself, rather than a means to an end. In my experience, it is also an excellent model for good ministry.

And so, applying the golden rule to people we find difficult to stomach, Jesus says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you."

What I think Jesus is saying here is stop treating people like a means to an end but rather as an end unto themselves. Don't think of your family members or friends as existing to serve you. Think of yourself as existing to help them on their way to salvation. Don't think of classmates or co-workers as a means to serve you and your wants. Think of yourself as being there to serve them as the children of God that they are. And when it comes to our enemies, don't think of them as existing to be punished and shamed to satisfy our thirst for revenge. Think of them as needing love, perhaps even tough love at times, so to help them on their way to salvation...the way you would want to be treated. Follow? We don't accomplish this by responding to hatred with hate and violence with violence. As a wise man once said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth just makes the whole world blind and toothless. I think of amazing souls like St. Oscar Romero, Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. who demonstrated with their lives that victory over tyranny is not best accomplished through violence but rather through radical non-violence. Hate is not defeated by more hate. Only love can triumph over darkness in the end. How do we get there? Jesus shows us the way, most perfectly in his passion, death and resurrection, however foreshadowed beautifully with the golden rule Jesus is expanding upon this weekend: do unto to others as you would have them do unto you. What does this look like? I believe that journey begins by never treating another human being as a means to an end but rather an end unto him/herself.