

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Difference Between Charity and Justice”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Whew! What a gospel reading. Jesus cuts to the core of what it means to live justly in the eyes of God. This Gospel is a continuation of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew’s Gospel. The location of the mountain is important because this is the place where heaven and earth connect. This is where Jesus not only affirms the teaching of the law and the prophets; he perfects them.

My friends, whenever I run into this Gospel reading, I can’t help but think about the concepts of “justice” and “charity”. You will understand why in a minute or two. The difference has been explained to me in this way. Imagine a village by a river. Now, the people of this village began to take notice of the injured people washing up onto the beach of their village. Being a good people, they took it upon themselves to wash their guests’ wounds, bandaging them, feeding them, and helping them on their way to recovery. This good activity, of taking care of the injured washing up on their beach, is an act of charity. I think we can all agree that the world would be a far more wonderful place if everyone chose to be more charitable towards those in need. However, we should not confuse charity with justice. What would an act of justice be then in the case of aiding someone who washed up on your beach? An act of justice would be to travel up stream to find out what is causing their guests to be injured in the first place and putting a stop to it. Do you see the difference? Justice is not just about giving aid to someone in need. It is about getting to the heart of the problem and solving it.

There is much we could discuss about this with how we address the many problems our world faces; however, this principle can also be applied to how we care for our souls. For instance, Jesus says in our Gospel reading, you heard from your ancestors that you shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment. But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother or says to his brother “Raqa” which is Aramaic for “You idiot” or who harbor bitter anger in their hearts will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Do you see what Jesus is doing here? The commandment, “thou shalt not kill” is a good commandment, and the commandment to be good stewards of the language we choose to use towards other people is also good advice, but the focus of these commandments is external behavior. Jesus wants us to examine what is happening in our hearts that cause these external behaviors in the first place. He wants us to travel up stream in the soul, so to speak, to discover what it is that is causing the anger inside of us in the first place, toward my brother, sister, parent, child, coworker, neighbor, the list goes on.

And so, we can ask ourselves, who are the people in my life that I harbor real resentment or even hatred for? What does it feel like to have resentment or hatred for someone all the time? Well, it feels like fiery Gehenna inside of us, doesn’t it? That what it feels like right and so Jesus is spot on with his warning here. Who here wants to feel like that all the time, raise your hands? No one wants to feel that way. That feeling causes us to act uncharitably and unjustly towards others, and we can say and do terrible things to others as a result. Jesus is inviting us to let go of whatever it is inside of us that is encouraging us to feel that way. Instead of spending our lives brooding over injury, maybe we would be better off channeling that negative energy into finding

peace and praying for the people we find most difficult instead. This is easier said than done, I get it, but it is very important for our spiritual health.

It is in this same way that we can understand what Jesus says next. Jesus says, you have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you, everyone who looks at another with lust has already committed adultery with his or her heart. Again, the commandments against adultery and fornication are helpful as they are obvious. But again, these activities are external consequences of what is causing these activities in the first place. Jesus says do not even look at another with lust. I would define lust as treating another human being as an object to be used for personal pleasure rather than as the child of God that they are. And so, Jesus says, if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out, if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. What does he mean by this? He obviously isn't telling us to literally chop off our hands and tear out our eyes. What Jesus is doing here is employing hyperbole to get our attention, to shake us into identifying what is going on in our interior life that is causing lustful thoughts and actions in the first place. Our relationships in this world would be far, far better if we stopped dehumanizing others by treating them in our hearts as objects for personal pleasure. None of us wants to be treated that way, so we shouldn't treat or look at other people that way either.

Jesus also says, it is also said that whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce. But I say to you, whoever divorces their wife, unless the marriage is unlawful, and marries another, commits adultery. I believe the meaning of this is related to what follows next in the Gospel reading, namely, when it comes to our oaths, let our 'yes' mean 'yes' and our 'no' mean 'no'. The promises given in marriage are meant to last a lifetime, in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad. Jesus gives the exception 'unless the marriage is unlawful', which is to say, the vows exchanged at the time of marriage were defective for some reason. This is why the Church has an annulment ministry that explores that possibility for people who find themselves in this situation. However, everyone who has been affected by divorce, however unavoidable this can be at times, knows the pain and suffering divorce causes to everyone around them, not just the couple, but friends, children, family, and the community. When troubles arise in marriage, the invitation is to travel up stream to find the root cause of the marital difficulties and address these problems proactively through counselling or retreats. Again, this is sometimes far easier said than done, but you will be so very glad that you did.

No matter what it is we are dealing with my friends, if we want to become more just in the eyes of God, Jesus suggests that we travel up stream, to take a deeper look into our hearts, and examine the root causes of what drives our behavior in the first place. What causes us to get angry? What causes us to withhold our charity? What causes us to eat or drink too much? What causes us to get depressed? What causes us act out sinfully? Only by travelling up stream to the core of our being in prayer, with Jesus to guide us, can we identify what drives our behavior so to finally become liberated from the sins that make us unhappy so to live more fully the joy and peace God wants for us all, through Christ our Lord. Amen.