

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Year A
September 7, 2014

Our Duty to our Neighbor

Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matt 18:15-20

Those of you of a certain age may recall the harrowing story of Kitty Genovese, the New York City woman who was murdered in 1964. Sadly, murders occur in our nation every day, but what was so newsworthy about this was the fact that a number of people witnessed the event as it happened, yet just one phone call was made to the police. While exact numbers of bystanders as well as the degree to which any were aware of the seriousness of her situation has been revised downward, the incident led psychologists to begin to study the phenomenon known as the Bystander Effect, as well as hasten the movement to develop the 911 call system. The convicted killer is still in prison, the longest serving inmate in NY.

What is our duty to our neighbor? In a complicated world, this is not as easy as it may seem. What is our duty to strangers, for example, the Christians in Iraq and Syria? Trouble is, many of us do not know our own neighbors and in an increasingly mobile society, it is no longer only city centers that are anonymous. Many in the suburbs do not know their neighbors. Thus, it is even more difficult to think of a stranger in any manner as a neighbor, if we do not know those who live just down the street.

Catholic tradition outlines several *Works of Mercy*, both spiritual and corporal. The *works of mercy* are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our **neighbor** in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, counseling, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead.¹

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. #2447

The passage from this morning's Gospel is clearly an example of another spiritual work of mercy, that of admonishing the sinner. That word comes from the Latin meaning "to warn."² For understandable reasons, most of us find it difficult to admonish the sinner. Perhaps we feel hypocritical, all too aware of our own sinfulness, even though our faith does not demand perfection before calling out the fault of another. Properly understood, our approach to one another is based upon our conviction that each of us is flawed, and that admonishment begins first with ourselves.

So it is in humility that the good parent calmly explains to his/her children the errors of their ways, promising assistance. Parents err when they see their role as protecting their children even if it means defending their own bad behavior. It is the worst thing they can do. With respect to adult relationships, these difficult conversations are examples of fraternal correction. We are bound to correct another under the following conditions: "when his fault is a mortal sin, that is when it is an extremely serious matter; when we have authority or influence over him; and when there is reason to believe that our warning will not make him worse instead of better."³

Jesus admonished sinners, but he also developed a relationship and this is what is often missing when we seek to admonish others. I must make an important distinction when it comes to judging the morality of people's actions. We are not judging someone's soul, but rather we are making objective judgments about actions. I do not presume judge a person's heart. But sometimes we do not have time to have a relationship, as in confession. St. Padre Pio once warned a man in Confession to change his lifestyle because he was in danger of going to hell. When the man said that he did not believe in hell, Padre Pio told him he would believe when he got there!

² Alteration of Latin *admonēre* to warn, from *ad-* + *monēre* to warn

³ Baltimore Catechism, Q. # 814

A father must not shy away from calling others out when they act inappropriately in front of children, such as when using inappropriate language at a public sporting event. In doing so, they are protecting them. I know parents who simply would not take their kids to some stadiums because of the behavior of other fans.

The spiritual works of mercy, especially “Admonish the sinner,” is a tough but sorely needed lesson for every one of us. It is not at all clear how best to carry it out, whether for parents, colleagues or pastors! We pray for the grace to properly discern, knowing what might backfire, thereby making it worse, and what will best accomplish the goal of returning another to the right path. We struggle in this together, trusting that the Lord will lead us the way.