

February 24, 2019

1 Sam 26:2,7-9,12-13,22-23; 1 Cor 15:45-49; LK 6:27-38

Last week I was standing in a juvenile detention center holding a service for the teenage boys incarcerated there. I asked for a volunteer to read aloud the Gospel we heard today and they looked up to see what I would say about it. Fewer of Jesus' speeches are as direct and clear. Not too many are filled with such unambiguous directives. But, it was not how clear the statements were that made me wonder what to say to them - it wasn't that I worried how to translate this language in a way they could understand - it was that the concept Jesus was talking about was very foreign to them. These young men were used to locating enemies just by the color of clothing they were wearing, or what neighborhood they lived in, or what group of people they associated with. The idea to not have animosity of for their enemies was hard for them to accept - the idea of turning the other cheek ... unthinkable! What amazed me the most was not the way they were very attentive and were clearly thinking about the idea, but that it struck me that we all are not too much different then they are sometimes.

We may not use gang violence and weapons on our enemies, but we can fall into the same trap that Jesus was talking about. We can engage in the same judgementalism and animosity that they do - we can even wish failure or harm to another and justify it by what we have judged them to be. We all have a tendency to treat better those who are good to us, or are a member of whatever group we identify with. But Jesus tells us today: *For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same.* This flies in the face of our current culture that encourages us to identify ourselves as wronged as often as possible, to identify those who wronged us, and to get the retribution that we believe we deserve. I read an article recently that spoke of how terms such as "violence," "bullying," and "prejudice" have been expanded in recent years beyond their original meanings. The author believes he revealed "how [these] concepts have been refashioned to extend the range of events and experiences ... to which individuals can take offense, and [then] interpret themselves as victimized and in need of restitution." The authors do not want to minimize the experience of those who have been truly victimized, they were saying that we have been encouraged to extend these terms beyond their original meanings to the point that almost anyone can take offense at almost anything and then judge the proper punishment that the other should receive.

Jesus tells us today: *Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.* and he says *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.* Those who do legitimate harm to another should receive the appropriate response and punishment - the Bishops and Pope Francis are in discussions of how to more properly respond to true acts of abuse, violence, bullying, and harm that have occurred. Instead of these acts of true harm, today let us consider at the times when we judge another who merely wounded our pride or even had no intention of harm, how we become angry at a person for what they are wearing, or who they associate with, or where they live. We can look at how we have born a negative view of a person for an unkind word or action they threw at us and then determined and executed the punishment we felt was appropriate. *Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned.* This is a hard task Jesus gives us. Sometimes we feel so justified in condemning, sometimes (like the boys I was speaking to last week) we find it foreign that we would be loving to a person we have regarded for years as an enemy. But because a person has a bad view of us, or we of them, is no reason to not have mercy.

Look at the first reading. David comes upon Saul in a vulnerable position. Saul has been trying to kill David - how could he not feel that he had the right to strike first while he had the opportunity - he is even encouraged into the act by one of his buddies: *God has delivered your enemy into your grasp this day. Let me nail him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I will not need a second thrust!* ... such anger, such assurance that this person deserved to be killed. Notice also that he is implying that God wants David to do it - this is the right thing to do. But David stops him realizing that this is not right: *Do not harm him, for who can lay hands on the LORD's anointed and remain unpunished?* His sparing of Saul made Saul think twice and he stopped trying to kill him - that was the outcome that God was looking for. Not that the bad one get killed the good one live, but that they both live together in peace.

We have to move from this natural human tendency to judge and then enact punishment. We have to move from the natural and vengeful, to the spiritual and loving. As we heard in the second reading: *But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual ... Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one.* We are called to be merciful and forgiving as God is merciful and forgiving - to become more and more in the image of the heavenly one. As we do, we will understand better the words Jesus spoke today: *To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* Then you will be *perfect as your heavenly father is perfect* (Matt 5:48)