

## 26<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

September 28, 2008 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

At one point in my misspent youth, I had finished college and was having some difficulty finding a job. There was a recession on back then, and jobs were scarce. So I knew that there was only one sensible thing to do, and I did it: I went to graduate school.

At that time, the emphasis in my discipline was on statistical analysis. Measuring things. I learned a lot about statistics. If it can't be quantified and measured, it must not be "real."

I wonder . . . is there a way to measure our belief in God?

Today's readings suggest that perhaps there is. Maybe what we actually *do* is the real measure of our belief in God. Now, do not misunderstand me; we are not saved by what we do. We are not saved by our works. We cannot earn our way into heaven. What we do flows from our faith, from our discernment of what we *should* do as believers.

In our reading from Ezekiel, we hear about taking individual responsibility for our own actions.

"When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die. But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, he does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die."

So . . . the only way to "life" in the hereafter is living a virtuous life in the here and now. This way is open to us if we do what is right.

In the Gospel, Jesus draws a sharp contrast between those who do good, and those who only give the appearance of doing good. One son only *says* he will work; the other son goes to work. Jesus points out the similarity with those who think in only legalistic terms and do not "practice what they preach." This Jesus to the conclusion that

“prostitutes and tax collectors” are more likely to enter the Kingdom of God than the chief priests and the elders.

One reason may have been that prostitutes and tax collectors don't have an inflated self-image to protect. They don't have a religious reputation to justify. They realize who they really are. Sometimes those who are not burdened by their own positions of authority and their own overblown egos find it easier to recognize their sins and their need for redemption.

Even our Psalm reflects someone who sincerely wants to follow the Lord's way, and recognizes his own need of the Lord's mercy for his sins.

Today, Paul appeals to the Church at Philippi to live in unity. The best way to do this is to practice humility. The truly humble person regards others as more important than himself. Not easy to do – at least it doesn't come easy to me. But it's part of our call as Christians to serve the needs of others. Jesus “took the form of a slave,” and served, and was obedient to God even to the point of death.

We are all free to determine our own lives – to think and do as we please – and to accept the consequences. Our response to God is our own free, personal responsibility, from deep inside ourselves. One way or another, everyone fulfills this responsibility in some way. Unfortunately, some people respond to God by choosing *not* to respond.

The response can't be just words. We have to respond with our whole selves – heart and mind.

Once we reach a certain age, we are free and responsible agents of our actions. Particularly in America, we hold “freedom” as one of our most fundamental values. But with freedom comes responsibility. We are each individually responsible for what we do. If there is a disconnect between what we say and what we do, between what we know we should do and what we actually do, it is our own responsibility and no one else's.

One good example is true Christian marriage. As you may know, I still do a little work with the diocesan marriage preparation program. I try to do what I can to help engaged couples truly understand what Christian marriage entails – complete surrender of self to the good of the other person and the good of the marital relationship, for life.

Sometimes people don't know how to do this. Sometimes people think they understand but have a lot of trouble living it out. Sometimes people are more interested in the wedding than they are in the marriage. Maybe that's a good example of the difference between what we "say" and what we "do." Sometimes people say "I do." But *do* they . . . really?

In a broader sense, we are called not to look after just our own interests. Jesus gave up life for us. The least we can do is give up just a little of our lives – a little of our own self-interest – for others. How can I help others?

This doesn't mean just trying to find some "needy person" to be a victim of our charity. It means emptying ourselves, doing good with no thought or hope of reward, doing good not even because it makes us feel good, but because it's what we know we should do. Of course, we will sometimes be disappointed in the outcome. That's the way life is.

I'll close with three of my favorite quotes. One Scriptural, two not. All of them are about measuring our love for God.

In the Letter of James, we read . . .

"Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it."

-- James 4:17

And George Bernard Shaw wrote . . .

"The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

-- George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950), "The Devil's Disciple" (1901), act II

And a new one I just saw yesterday in the parish newsletter. Last year, a man named Kevin Dorsey competed in the Tour d'Esprit. He ran for the entire 24 hours and covered a total of 120 miles. A human being ran 120 miles in 24 hours, right out there. Afterwards, he said:

"While I was thrilled to have an opportunity to do a 24-hour run so close to home, I know that it is not really about running."

"It is about the medical mission to Haiti – that is what really matters, what really counts. It touches my heart to know that there are people like you doing this kind of hard work for other humans. Your mission has inspired me to try harder, to do some good for others. I know I can do better."

**Reading 1**

Ez 18:25-28

Thus says the LORD:

You say, "The LORD's way is not fair!"

Hear now, house of Israel:

Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?

When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die.

But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed,

he does what is right and just,

he shall preserve his life;

since he has turned away from all the sins that he has committed,

he shall surely live, he shall not die.

**Responsorial Psalm**

Ps 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14

**R. (6a) Remember your mercies, O Lord.**

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me;

teach me your paths,

guide me in your truth and teach me,

for you are God my savior.

**R. Remember your mercies, O Lord.**

Remember that your compassion, O LORD,

and your love are from of old.

The sins of my youth and my frailties remember not;

in your kindness remember me,

because of your goodness, O LORD.

**R. Remember your mercies, O Lord.**

Good and upright is the LORD;

thus he shows sinners the way.

He guides the humble to justice,

and teaches the humble his way.

**R. Remember your mercies, O Lord.**

**Reading II**

Phil 2:1-11 or 2:1-5

Brothers and sisters:

If there is any encouragement in Christ,

any solace in love,

any participation in the Spirit,

any compassion and mercy,

complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love,

united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory;

rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves,

each looking out not for his own interests,

but also for those of others.

Have in you the same attitude

that is also in Christ Jesus,

Who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

something to be grasped.

Rather, he emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

coming in human likeness;

and found human in appearance,

he humbled himself,

becoming obedient to the point of death,

even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him

and bestowed on him the name

which is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

**or**

Brothers and sisters:

If there is any encouragement in Christ,

any solace in love,

any participation in the Spirit,

any compassion and mercy,

complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love,

united in heart, thinking one thing.

Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory;

rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves,

each looking out not for his own interests,

but also for those of others.

Have in you the same attitude  
that is also in Christ Jesus.

**Gospel**

Mt 21:28-32

Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:  
"What is your opinion?  
A man had two sons.  
He came to the first and said,  
'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'  
He said in reply, 'I will not,'  
but afterwards changed his mind and went.  
The man came to the other son and gave the same order.  
He said in reply, 'Yes, sir, 'but did not go.  
Which of the two did his father's will?"  
They answered, "The first."  
Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you,  
tax collectors and prostitutes  
are entering the kingdom of God before you.  
When John came to you in the way of righteousness,  
you did not believe him;  
but tax collectors and prostitutes did.  
Yet even when you saw that,  
you did not later change your minds and believe him."