

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time (C), October 17, 2010

I don't know how many of you still get the morning Seattle Times, but I do; and I couldn't help sitting up straight when I read an article two weeks ago entitled "Many Americans Know Little About Religion." It came from a survey just released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which surveyed 3,400 people with 32 questions over seven topics. Among the findings of the survey was one about the Catholics who took the survey, which said that nearly half of them did not know that their Church teaches that the bread and wine in Communion actually become the Body and Blood of Christ. That didn't say that nearly half (45%) didn't believe it, which would be another matter; it said that nearly half *did not know* that our Church teaches that!

I don't know if that surprises you, but that surprised me. (Maybe I need to get out more!) But the Eucharist is not going to be the subject of my homily today – maybe that subject is one for Holy Thursday, or even better, the feast Corpus Christi, when the scriptures and feasts lead us into a consideration of what the Eucharist means for us as followers of Jesus. Suffice it to say that our Church has always believed that Jesus is really present in the Eucharist; that didn't change with Vatican II! However... today's scripture leads somewhere else. We'll get to that in a second, but that article in the Times did make me ask the questions, "What else don't we know, as followers of Jesus?" and, perhaps, "Why don't we know it?"

Today's parable is actually pretty easy to follow. We have a corrupt judge, and a widow who is seeking justice. And despite the fact that this judge doesn't care at all about God or justice, and certainly not about this widow or her case, she keeps at it so persistently that he finally turns around to deliver a just decision for her.

This parable is about praying always; it's about persistence in our prayer. But it's also clearly about something else – it's about justice. Justice is the driving force of the widow's persistence. The widow's plea is for the judge to "render a **just** decision." It doesn't say, "a favorable decision," but "a **just** decision." The judge finally agrees: "Because she keeps bothering me I shall deliver a **just** decision for her." And Jesus sums it up by asking "Will not God then secure the rights [in **justice**] of his chosen ones?" And then Jesus answers his own question, saying "God will see to it that **justice** is done for them."

Justice... Our scriptures – both the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels – consistently depict our God as a God of justice, a God who loves the poor, the outcast, the oppressed. These are God's *anawim*, a Hebrew word for "the poor seeking God for deliverance." In Deuteronomy 24, from the Torah, God says "You shall not violate the rights of the orphan, the widow, or the alien," alien meaning foreigner or immigrant. Inscribed in our beautiful stained glass here at St. Bridget are words from Isaiah 58, that were chosen to provide a theme for the whole work, words for our parish of St. Bridget to live by: "(This is the kind of fast I wish...) Share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor... Give relief to the oppressed. Then your light will shine like the dawn, and your wound will be healed." Justice is the reason St. Bridget has had on its wall in our hall, the Seven Foundations of Catholic Social Teaching, and why our Church teaches that we should have a Preferential Option for the Poor, should choose on behalf of the poor.

And yet, while we might know these things on one level, Catholic Social Teaching is often called "the Church's best kept secret." Not because it's secret! It's because it's a set of inconvenient truths – inconvenient because justice upsets an order based on wealth and privilege, and the pursuit of justice causes controversy. And controversy gives us plenty of excuse to close our eyes and ears and cling to what's close and comfortable for us. It was the same in Old Testament times. It was the same in Jesus' time. It is true today.

In our country today there's plenty of controversy. There's a lot of noise, especially political noise! And frankly I hate today's political climate; it provides the perfect cover for both parties to appeal to their base without really getting anything done. There was an old Catholic worker saying many years ago that said, "Don't vote -- it only encourages them." I don't believe that, but boy I sure feel the sentiment!

But now you might also see why I asked the questions a moment ago, "What else don't we know, as followers of Jesus, and why don't we know it?" There are all kinds of reasons that we might not know very much about our rich faith traditions of justice. For instance, did you know that for years, our Church has laid out a vision for justice for immigrants... a vision based on scripture and universal teachings of justice, but tailored to our American situation? In fact, several years ago, President Bush proposed comprehensive immigration legislation that modeled much of that vision... but it never went anywhere. President Obama, who won a huge majority of the Latino vote in 2008, promised to address this issue... but the political climate is even worse now than it was several years ago, and he hasn't really even tried seriously yet. In fact, detentions and deportations have intensified.

And in the midst of all this, I suspect that most of us don't even know that the Catholic Church has teachings and recommendations about immigration, much less what they might be. The teachings are rooted in first-hand knowledge of the immigrant and their situation, because our Church is right on the front lines with this issue. And those teaching flow from the belief that individuals have a God-given right to migrate, especially to avoid persecution, or war, or calamity, but also in search of opportunities for a decent life for themselves and their families. Nations have a right to secure borders, but those must be in balance with the right to migrate. I'll bet most of you didn't know that.

Last year, our JustFaith participants spent a day with immigrants who shared their personal stories; most of them were what we call "illegal immigrants." In a word, our parishioners were touched; they were really moved. These folks were not only like us, with families, and the desire to care for them... they also shared our Catholic faith. The word "solidarity" comes to mind – that's what it means. So these parishioners prepared a program to present to the parish at large over the next several months; you'll find an insert in your bulletin today about it, and there's a table after Mass, with materials and someone you can talk to if you want.

The pursuit of justice requires persistence and prayer. And immigration is only one justice issue we could touch on. They chose it because it touched them, and because most Catholics don't know our Church teaches about it. They could have chosen Life issues, since this is Respect Life month, or economic justice questions, given our unemployment rate around 10%. Maybe they will, some time in the future.

Finally, our scripture today leaves us with a little zinger, that I'd like to end with. Jesus ends this teaching with a rhetorical question, "When the Son of Man comes (again), will he find faith on earth?" What kind of faith would we have, if we would turn our back on questions of justice for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in our midst?

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