

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2014

A few months ago Pope Francis caused a certain amount of consternation when in his “Letter to Non-believers” addressed to the journalist Eugenio Scalfari, he spoke about the value of doing good even by non-believers. The Pope was not suggesting that the good that we do is a way of making an otherwise angry God happy and pleased with us. The Pope has already made perfectly clear on numerous occasions that God’s love for us precedes anything and everything we might do. The proclamation of the saving love of God, Francis has emphasized, comes before all moral and religious implications and imperatives. The Pope’s response to Scalfari was about something else. It was about trying to speak about the value of goodness and mercy and love- wherever it’s found- in a world that values power and control, that has a morality of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, and that often laughs and scoffs at anything like mercy and love.

The answer that the Pope gives to this problem touches on what is embedded in the gospel reading for today. There is certainly something that is called “sin”, the Pope says, even for those who have no faith, but that sin occurs when we refuse to follow our conscience. Listening to and obeying my conscience means deciding what is good and what is evil when I am confronted with life. And I can’t escape this, regardless of whether I consciously believe in God or not. When I see someone in need, when I am confronted with whether I will act out of self-interest or in the interest of another, when I need to choose whether I will respond to hatred with hatred, then my conscience stands in front of me and demands a decision. I may turn my back on God, I may try to run away from the very idea of God, but I am still left with my conscience and left with

deciding whether I will do good or whether I will do evil. We are constantly being confronted with what St. James in this epistle calls the “royal law” of the scriptures, the law that tells me that God’s longing for me is that I should love other people like I love myself. In one way or another, I cannot avoid that.

This “royal law” is, as the Pope says, both the heart of what God is like and what God wants for his human creatures. Love, mercy, he says, is the force that can save human beings and the force that can save the world from the cancer of sin, and from moral and spiritual evil. Only love- God’s love shown to us and our love responding to and mirroring the divine love- can fill the emptiness, the negative chasms that evil opens in our own hearts and in human history.

And what does this love look like? At the Roman Mass we heard Jesus say in Matthew’s gospel:

“offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.”

At the Byzantine Liturgy, again Matthew’s gospel portrays the Last Judgment as one in which the Son of Man will say to the sheep who have heard his voice:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

When we hear texts like these, we hear what the foolish love of God looks like, a love that calls us out of the spiral of evil- the spiral of evil that blinds us to the needs of others and that enables hatred to produce yet more hatred. This is a spiral into which we middle-class, conventional people can so easily enter without even knowing it. And in place of this spiral of evil, Jesus calls us to a foolish divine love that no longer lives according to the law of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”, a law to which we are all very prone in one way or another. As the Pope says, the Evil One is smart. He dupes us into thinking that human justice can save us and can save the world. But it is only God’s justice that can save us, and God’s justice reveals itself on the Cross of Jesus. And that Cross is God’s judgment on all of us and on this world. It is the supreme act of justice, but it is also the supreme act of mercy.

One of the most powerful things that the 16th-century reformer Martin Luther ever wrote is very much along these lines of Pope Francis. Luther struggled with what he saw and experienced as the stern and terrifying wrath of God; he lived with a ferociously severe God of judgment. God was in some sense the “All Terrible One”, and so Luther struggled with how God could also be the “All Merciful One”. And finally his response was, *“We know God aright when we grasp him not in his might or wisdom (for then he proves terrifying) but [when we grasp him] in his kindness and love. In Christ, only in Christ. In the Lord of life, born in the squalor of a cow stall and dying as a malefactor under the desertion and derision of men, crying out to God and receiving for an answer only the trembling of the earth and the blinding of the sun, even by God forsaken. . .”* In all of this, in this wrath of the All Terrible One, we see disclosed our redemption, Luther said, we see that God’s *“love will not let go of us”*.

“That God’s love will not let go of us!” This is the heart of the gospel that Pope Francis has once again articulated so clearly and so boldly. And this is the heart of what the Law is about. To be holy as God is holy means first and foremost that we *“Take no revenge and cherish no grudge”*, and that we *“love our neighbor like we love ourselves.”* I can only embrace the foolishness of a love that will feed the hungry, that will clothe the poor, that will visit the imprisoned, that will love the enemy, that will pray for those who harm us, and that will turn the other cheek- I can only begin to do these kinds of things when I *know* that God’s love has not let go of *me!*

Very shortly we will enter the Lenten Season once again, and to enter it rightly we need to reflect on the gospel that we heard today. God has not let go of you and me, but often we have let go of God. This is why you and I *need* Lent. It’s a truism, but one that still needs to be said: God doesn’t need Lent, and God takes no delight in our suffering, whether natural or self-imposed. We- you and I- need Lent because we have not loved. There is still an emptiness and an negative chasm in our hearts. There is still a cancer of sin and a moral and spiritual evil that lurks inside of us and pushes us to turn away from those around us.

That’s why you and I need more prayer, more fasting, and more alms-giving. These three are the concrete spiritual tools given to help us to see and then to confront all that stuff in our lives that keeps us from knowing that God has not let go of us and from knowing that we then should not let go of one another. When I say either to myself or to somebody else that I don’t need more prayer, that I don’t need to fast, that I already give enough to other people in one way or another; in other words, when I say that I

don't need Lent, I should pause for a moment and really think about what I'm saying, about what I'm claiming for myself.

These tools, these weapons, of prayer, fasting and alms-giving, are given to us in order to shape us, in order to form our conscience so that when I am confronted with a choice between good and evil, with which all people are confronted, I might be better prepared to make the better choice. Lent is not about winning God's favor, it is not about trying to please a God who is annoyed with us, it is not about making sacrifices that somehow placate a deity who delights in our discomfort. Lent is about learning how *not* to stop the divine flow, how *not* to impede love. Lent is learning how to let mercy and goodness and compassion move in us and through us. It's about letting love take hold of us, shake us, turn us upside down, and then send us out into the world in the name of a God who never stops, even for moment, to wait for us with desire and with mercy and with tenderness.