

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jul 20th 2014

This summer here in the Midwest has brought ample, if not excessive, rains. While outdoor activities are curtailed during rainy days, the production of weeds in my yard is not. Recently I've been spending a lot of time pulling weeds and thinking about ways to prevent new weeds from taking over the landscape. Weeds are prominently featured in a parable Jesus shares with the crowd in Matthew's gospel today. I have always appreciated the parables Jesus shares and although I believe the intent is to help an abstract concept be more concrete, the parables do not necessarily make concepts simpler for me. The farmer in the parable is clear that the weeds will be gathered and burned while the wheat will be taken into the barn. At first glance this is so straightforward that sinners burn in hell and true believers go to heaven. Yet I know that the delineation is not so clear.

The other readings today speak to me of the paradox of justice. In Romans we are reminded that we are not alone and the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. And the book of Wisdom describes God's loving engagement of power "but though you are the master of might, you judge with clemency and with much lenience you govern us." My prayer around the phrase "those who are just must be kind" brings me to reflect upon restorative justice which engages the paradox of accountability and compassion.

The US Catholic Bishops in 2000 issued a document - Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice. A restorative approach to justice attends to the needs of the victim of the crime, the offender and also the community. This is a rich and more healing approach than a strict retributive approach in which the weeds are simply sent to burn. In my career I have had the privilege of facilitating dialogues between victims of crime and the persons they harmed. Many times there were powerful moments of empathy and forgiveness. A restorative approach holds the offenders more accountable for their actions than a retributive system where they passively accept the punishment given them.

The Bishops' document contains many guidelines for policy and directions including offering victims the opportunity to participate more fully in the criminal justice process, insisting that punishment has a constructive and rehabilitative purpose and encouraging spiritual healing and renewal for those who commit a crime. We as Church are called to responsibility and action in ways such as by teaching right from wrong and standing by victims while we reach out to offenders.

The Catholic bishops conclude their document on restorative justice with these words: "We are guided by the paradoxical Catholic teaching on crime and punishment: We will not tolerate the crime and violence that threatens the lives and dignity of our sisters and brothers, and we will not give up on those who have lost their way. We seek both justice and mercy. Working together, we believe our faith

calls us to protect public safety, promote the common good, and restore community. We believe a Catholic ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration can become the foundation for the necessary reform of our broken criminal justice system.”

My prayer leads me to ask: When do I judge another person harshly? How do I demonize another person? When do I show compassion? How can I strive to ask what are the needs of members of my community? Committing to the principles of restorative justice helps me live my Catholic faith in the image of our loving and forgiving God.

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