

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Oct 31st 2014

“Who among you, if your son or ox falls into a cistern,
would not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?” Luke 14

Jesus must really be filled with joy when he hears Pope Francis, or the Synod Fathers, talk about compassion and mercy. In our day, too, there are some who are more concerned about the rules than about who needs comfort and support. Francis has described the Church as a "field hospital," and has reminded us that no one was drawn closer to Jesus or this faith community with a scolding finger. Francis has called us, like Jesus did, to reach out to those on the margins and to embrace them with mercy.

Why is mercy so feared? I suspect there can be a sincere fear that it implies "laxity" or even a denial of what we believe. A recent headline shouted, "The Synod plea for mercy is called heresy!" While the fearful religious leaders of his day feared that Jesus might be breaking the law, he changes their focus on the law: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" His focus is on healing. He has no intention of breaking the law. Jesus came to fulfill it. Jesus was intent that a focus on the law alone did not blind us to those who suffer and did not become a reason for not healing those we can comfort.

To offer mercy and healing does not mean that there wasn't any sin or brokenness. Mercy means we forgive sins. It means we love the sinner as Jesus did. As he loves all of us.

The gospel images of Jesus become more vivid for us, while we, as Church, are discussing how we can appropriately serve families who are struggling. It seems clear that Jesus' first instinct was compassion. When the paralyzed man was lowered into the house where Jesus was teaching, the first thing he said to the man is, "Your sins are forgiven."

A number of Synod participants reminded us that growth is gradual. Our teaching and our laws don't say, "You either reach this level of perfection or you are out." Our teaching and our laws set before us a path for holiness and greater union with our God, communion with our brothers and sisters, and the way to salvation. Some of the Synod fathers asked us to reflect this year on how we include, respect and serve those who might be on the beginning of that path, those who might have strayed from that path, those who got knocked off that path by things out of their control, and those who are only partly there.

I felt very consoled by the Synod speakers, who without denying anything we hold sacred, urged us all to reflect upon how we can get better at accompanying people along the way, without judgment.

Paul showed that affectionate care for the community at Philippi:

"I am confident of this,
that the one who began a good work in you
will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. "

He prays for their growth in ways that we can pray for each other:

"And this is my prayer:
that your love may increase ever more and more
in knowledge and every kind of perception,
to discern what is of value,
so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God."

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