

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 23rd 2015

As we enter into our Lenten journey, the Church places a matched pair of readings before us. Both readings focus on the obligations of love. Moses is instructed “the whole assembly” on how to live out their call to holiness. In the Gospel, Jesus offers us criteria for dividing up “the sheep from the goats.” God’s invitation for us is to grow in love in our communities.

In both of these readings, the focus is on the relationship between the individual and her community. The holiness of God’s children is measured by how they treat each other. They are to avoid theft, dishonesty, and slander, and to refrain from hindering the handicapped. Affirmatively, they are to offer fair wages, to act with justice, and to defend the life of their neighbors. Overall, they are commanded to discard hatred and to love.

Jesus takes these commands and refines them. Where Leviticus instructs “neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the mighty,” Jesus is clear that love requires care and compassion “for one of these least ones.” Food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty. Visitation of the sick and the imprisoned. Welcome to stranger and clothes for the naked. The love we are to cling to is a love that acts.

Placing these readings at the start of Lent, the Church reminds us that the focus of our love is on God, through the people we encounter in our daily lives. Lent is a season of renewal. Acts of penance and discipline lead us back to God, lead us to reconciliation. Each of us is familiar with the tradition of giving something up for Lent. We may forego coffee or sweets. Those of us who are healthy and able to do so are asked to abstain from meat on Fridays in Lent. Some of us may choose to do something extra, rather than giving something up.

This focus is a good thing, but also only an entry point for our Lenten journeys. We do not follow these disciplines for their own sake. Nor do we follow them solely for our own sake. Rather, they help clarify our encounter with God. Distractions are removed. We re-focus our lives. The point is renewal. Renewed focus on God and God’s invitation for each of us to live out lives of love. Today’s readings remind us that we are called during this season to truly be women and men in solidarity with each other.

Pope Francis recalls this as well in his Message for Lent 2015. Lenten renewal is a gift from God that pushes us outward. Our temptations are too indifference. Lent moves us past this. It re-orient us from a selfish interiority into an generous focus on the world around us. All of our Lenten disciplines

lead us to overcome indifference and the false idol of self-sufficiency. In its place, the God's Spirit gives us new hearts, hearts "pierced by the Spirit, so as to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters."

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