

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 17th 2015

If you knew what this meant, I desire mercy not sacrifice,

you would not have condemned these innocent men.” - Matthew

On one of those Sundays in July when it was a toss-up whether the heat or the humidity was worse, the still un-air conditioned St. Cecilia’s Cathedral felt like a sauna.

We sweated through the first half of the 11:30 a.m. Mass and settled in for the homily. However our wonderful assistant pastor looked out at us and said, “It would be an injustice not to give you my full homily but you look like you would prefer mercy” -one of the shortest and most effective homilies I’ve ever heard. It resonates with today’s reading from Matthew.

As a softy who has to occasionally lay down the law to students, I struggle with the meaning of mercy. I don’t think that Jesus would define mercy as anything goes. In today’s Gospel, he explains why his disciples were justified in breaking the rules and points to a Biblical example of that. We can’t live without rules but Jesus seems to be telling us to consider the context within which we might either break some rules ourselves or enforce them on others.

I think, for example, of Dr. Martin Luther King’s immortal “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” about the importance of breaking unjust laws in order to change them.

In our mundane lives, we need to ask if there are extenuating circumstances that justify an exception to enforcing a rule or a way of doing so that is also merciful.

This spring I was upset with a student’s frequent absences and failure to turn in assignments. I was going to throw the book at her. By God, she deserved it!

Then she explained the crisis she was going through. OMG. I felt about two inches tall. We worked out an arrangement that satisfied both rules and mercy.

Today’s Gospel and incidents like the one above remind us to prefer mercy to rigid rules if we can possibly justify doing so. I feel like Jesus must have been somewhere in my office when my student and I found a way to accommodate both rules and mercy.

Blessings on all of you facing such challenges!!!!

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