

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 23rd 2016

The Lord hears the cry of the poor; the Lord is a God of justice who knows no favorites; he who exalts himself shall be humbled. I am always struck by the irony that many people today, who claim to be religious in the broad Judeo-Christian tradition, by their words and actions ignore the obvious lessons and teachings of Jesus – God has a special concern for the poor, God doesn't play favorites, we (humans as well as everything else) are in this creation together, the prayer of the lowly will be heard on high and God will affirm what is right. Jesus reinforces this message of solidarity with the poor by reminding us that we should be very careful of being convinced of our own righteousness, for by doing so we run the risk of being humbled (as opposed to acting humbly).

I think moving down the path toward being convinced of our righteousness is inevitable when we focus on ourselves and are not aware of all that is happening around us. When we fail to listen with open ears, minds and especially hearts we can see only our own troubles and fail to hear the very real cry of all the actual poor people in the midst of our human existence – our oppressed sisters and brothers, both home and abroad.

Certainly those of us, or our family and neighbors, who have been harmed financially by recent economic changes feel poorer materially by the standards of our U.S. society. We compare the reduction in our well-being to that of our neighbors and see the disparity. But do we truly understand how much better off we are compared to the poor in so many parts of the rest of the world? Do our news stories and papers and magazines compare our material well-being in Our Town, USA to the people dying daily in Aleppo? Do we create false comparisons by not seeing ourselves as part of a community of humankind, instead of merely neighbors in Middleburg America?

Are we convinced of our own righteousness when we accept that climate change does pose harm for future generations and yet ignore simple changes in our own consumption that would steward and not exploit our precious gifts from our loving Creator? Have we become convinced of our own righteousness when we seek to exclude rather than provide refuge to our oppressed sisters and brothers who are displaced by war and famine and disease in their native countries? Have we become convinced of our own righteousness when we are not sensitive to the cries of people who are physically and emotionally harmed because of their skin color, or their economic status, or their religious traditions, or their addictions, or their gender identification, or their desire to live in families as they feel God has called them to do? Have we become convinced of our own righteousness when we feel resentful for all we do not have, instead of being grateful for even the very breath that keeps us alive in this moment? Have we become convinced of our own righteousness when we feel entitled to all we think we control instead of generously relinquishing control to our loving God, as Ignatius so poignantly taught us to do?

The Lord hears the cry of the poor. The Lord also gave us ears and hearts and heads and will to hear and see and act. So doesn't the Lord expect us to hear the cry of the poor also? Doesn't the Lord expect us to rescue these poor through our actions? Jesus taught us over and over to do what we are able for the least among us. When we act for those who are oppressed, and serve the Lord by comforting them in their time of need, are we not humbling ourselves by recognizing that our positions of relative privilege and good fortune are not a right to be hoarded but a gift to be shared?

And so my prayer today is for the grace to hear the cry of the poor, and to act on what I hear.

Tom Purcell-Creighton University's Heider College of Business