

HOMILY SUNDAY 33 – A (Homily 02)
“The Courage to Change What We Can”
(Proverbs 31:10-13, 16-18, 20, 26, 28-32; Psalm 128;
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 24:36; 25:14-30)

The well-known Serenity Prayer that is associated with the Twelve Step movement goes like this: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This prayer can help us make sense of the readings today, readings that present a challenge in their diversity.

The Gospel today asks us to have the courage to change the things that we can in our society, whose values are so often contradictory to that Gospel, and to do so whatever the cost to us.

There are two radically different interpretations to today’s Gospel. The usual interpretation is that God has given us all gifts and talents that we are to use to serve God and that if we do not use them, we will lose them.

Well-known spiritual writer and speaker, Richard Rohr, has another very interesting and provocative interpretation. He contends that the military, economic, political and religious institutions at the time of Jesus were corrupt, unjust and oppressive especially towards the poor, like so many dictatorships in our day whose leaders are desperately clinging to power.

The two individuals in the Gospel given more talents symbolize those who collude with the unjust systems, through bribery, graft, kick-backs, etc., and profit from that activity. They are praised and rewarded by those on top, those in power.

The one individual who hides his talent is like the one who blows the whistle on the corrupt system and is often ostracized and punished. This individual refuses to participate in the dishonest and unjust activities that are presented by their company, organization or employer. Not only that, they decide to do something about it and go public with the information that they have on the situation. They have the courage to change the things they can. For that they often pay a heavy price.

Every now and then we see that very phenomena in the news. In fact, one news magazine recently had three whistle-blowers on their front cover and covered their difficult experiences within its pages.

There is something to this interesting argument by Rohr. Seen from his perspective, Jesus is a whistle blower – he came to blow the whistle on the corrupt complex enmeshed system of governance and religious life of his time, and he suffered for it. Jesus saw immediately how that complex system was actually oppressing the poor. He refused to bow down to it, so he had to be done away with.

King Herod at the time of Jesus was a puppet king, imposed on the Jews by the Roman occupiers. He was in the process of refurbishing the Temple to his own glory, building up his own empire. He had put into place a system of taxation that was oppressing the poor, but was also enriching anyone who colluded with him, including the religious leaders of that time.

Jesus was a prophet from the Mosaic tradition, not a Temple prophet, so he was outside of that system, and able to critique it. That is why early on he was asked by the chief priests and Pharisees what his stand on taxes was. They were really trying to find out if he would join them in collusion with the Romans, to keep the status quo which had given them all a certain degree of security, wealth and power that they were afraid to lose.

Of course, Jesus refused to comply and that is why they started to find ways to get rid of him. That also explains why Jesus at one point went into the Temple with a whip and cleared out all the money changers and merchants who were gouging the poor. The people not only had to buy sacrifices from them at exorbitant prices for the sacrifices to be considered pure, but also had to pay a high commission to change their money into Jewish coinage. That injustice angered Jesus and stirred him to action, as similar injustices in our day should stir us to action.

The challenge put to us by this Gospel, seen in this light, is to have the faith and courage to take a stand for social justice, to do what we can to expose the unjust and corrupt institutions of our day, and to accept the often negative consequences our actions might incur.

Mahatma Gandhi serves as an example for us. One day he took a walk with eight of his closest disciples that parallels that of Jesus. In defiance of government order, they set out on a 200-mile walk to the sea. Gandhi was well known as a staunch opponent of India's stratified society, the caste system. He was also known as an

advocate for the “untouchables,” those who were members of no caste at all, not even the lowest. One evening, he and his followers arrived at a prosperous village and were given a great welcome. Passing through, much to the chagrin of the village leaders, he found his way outside the village to the hovels of the untouchables. He ate with them; he played with their children; he called them the children of God. He commented that he would have liked to be an “untouchable,” so that he could liberate them, and himself, from within. In the end, like Jesus, he paid for his stance with his life.

The second reading today can also be seen in the light of this insightful interpretation of the Gospel, in that to keep awake and be ready as children of the light, is to always be ready to struggle for the rights of the poor and the dispossessed in our society.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now can also be seen as a strong social justice statement, in that this is the one event, the one place on earth, where every person who participates is equal, has equal worth, is just as important as any other person. Rich or poor, high or low, we all take our place at the same table, where there is no distinction with regard to our status or standing in society.

So as we celebrate today, let us pray that we can truly live out that Serenity Prayer to change the things we can for the sake of the Gospel and the call for justice inherent in that Gospel.

In closing, let us pray that beautiful prayer together: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”