

6th Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

The Christian Journey-Part Two: Justice and Stewardship¹

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 4:7-10

John 15:9-17

Yesterday, I spent the day at the closing retreat of Leadership Fort Smith at Lake Fort Smith. It was a wonderful retreat. We took some time to review our experience of the last year, as well as make preparations for the future. This was an important part of the Leadership Fort Smith experience since it would not be very productive to simply learn a lot about leadership and about our city without putting into concrete action what our learning inspired. The same thing is true on our spiritual journey.

Last week, we looked at some of the stages of the spiritual journey. We looked specifically at the first stirrings of desire for a relationship with God and how that manifests itself in sporadic prayer and church attendance. We also talked about how that stage of spiritual growth usually does not change until we have a personal encounter with the Risen Christ. Then, we find ourselves drawn more deeply into community. We want to be more active within our family of faith. We find ourselves falling in love with the people around us. We also experience a new need for continued education in the mysteries of our faith.

We can summarize those “stages” or “movements” as being related to *discipleship*—or following and learning from Christ. This week, we’re going to look at the next stages of the Christian life, which can be described as *apostleship*—being sent by Christ. Jesus described this stage beautifully in today’s Gospel reading when He told the apostles, “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain...” (John 15:16). It’s important for us to notice that Jesus does not invite the apostles to isolate themselves from others, but rather, He sends them out—“go and bear fruit.” They were challenged to take what they had learned from following Jesus and put it into concrete action. There are two particular aspects of this apostleship that I am going to highlight in this homily. The first is justice and the second is stewardship.

In the earlier movements of our faith-life, we found ourselves falling more deeply in love with other people and being drawn more deeply into community. We not only felt a need to attend church, but we found ourselves caring for the people who sat around us. In what I am calling the *apostleship* phase, this love is manifested in a desire for justice. We find ourselves more concerned about the things going on in our community and in the world. Our love can no longer be quarantined to just our selves, our family, or our parish. We find ourselves interested and concerned about the people we read about in the newspaper and the people we hear about on the radio and television. We find a need growing within us to be active in bringing Christ’s care, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, and love to those people whom we may have never met. This is consistent with the Biblical understanding of justice.

¹ This “stage” in our relationship with Christ can be summarized in the idea of Apostleship (i.e. being sent by Christ to share His Way with the world), whereas the first stage is marked with Discipleship (i.e. following Christ, learning more about Him and His Way).

In our Psalm this weekend, we heard about God's justice—"The LORD has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice" (Psalm 98:2). The Old Testament understanding of justice was based on covenant relationship. Justice, for the Jews, only made sense when it was rooted in a loving relationship. The only way that God or human beings would act in just ways was if their actions were rooted in love for the other. This is why we would rarely find a Christian who is interested in social justice if he or she has not already gone through the spiritual stage of falling in love with God's people.

In order to enter into the justice of apostleship, we must be aware of and move beyond our prejudices and rationalized self-pervations. For example, I would guess that all of us adults here have had the experience of being asked for money by a homeless person. How often have we given the person money and later patted ourselves on our backs for being so kind and generous when, in reality, we gave the person money in order to get rid of them. It is much easier to give a homeless person money than be challenged to enter into that *relationship* with him or her that justice requires! The similar thing can be said of our reaction to Hispanics. I have heard many people complain about the illegal immigrants in our country. Many laws have been cited in these discussions and perfectly formulated reasons have been expressed all because we are fearful of what an immigrants presence might do to our way of living. It is much easier for us to quotes laws than it is to be in relationship with our Hispanic neighbors. What is their quality of life? What was their quality of life like in Mexico? What are their hopes and dreams? What are their fears? If we truly desire justice for immigrants, then we need to enter into relationship with them and fall in love with them.

Almost running parallel to this desire to promote justice is a deeper *stewardship*. Since, at this new stage of spiritual growth, we are less concerned with ourselves and more concerned about others, we find ourselves being "sent" by Christ to offer our time, talent and treasure to others. In this stage, it no longer makes sense for us to simply come to church on a regular basis. We find ourselves needing to be more involved than that; we desire to be involved in a ministry or service. We might become an extraordinary minister of Communion or an usher or a member of the choir. We might join the Social Concerns Committee or volunteer at the carnival or work in the flowerbeds around the church campus. Regardless of the form it takes, stewardship becomes a deeper part of our lives as our faith grows.

Just as our participation at church increases, we will also reevaluate our monetary stewardship. We will find ourselves compelled to give, not just from our surplus, but in a sacrificial way. The first checks we write each month will no longer be to credit card companies or clothing stores, but they will be our tithing checks—the first fruits that God has entrusted to our care as His stewards.

Individually and as a parish, we can evaluate where we are at on the spiritual journey by looking at our level of interest in justice and stewardship. We can also be challenged to grow spiritually by challenging ourselves to grow in justice and stewardship. Later this fall, we are going to have our first annual stewardship month at Christ the King Church. During that special month, we will learn more about the many ways that we can be involved in our parish and community and we will have an opportunity to pledge our stewardship in time, talent, and treasure. We will be encouraging every person in the parish to move beyond just attending Mass for an hour a week by serving in some capacity. I know that it is going to be very exciting and life-giving for our parish!