

Twentyfifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Acting Ethically

September 22, 2019

Fr. Max Oliva, S.J.

I love the readings for today's Mass – Amos 8:4-7, I Timothy 2:1-8, and Luke 16:10-13. I have loved their main theme – pursuing social justice, ever since God placed me at Sacred Heart Church in the middle of an African-American community in San Francisco. This was during the Civil Rights Movement. The prophet, Amos, is considered the prophet of social justice. In this passage he inveighs against the unjust practices of his time in which those who were disadvantaged were being exploited by unscrupulous businessmen. “Trampled upon,” as Amos puts it. The merchants were “tipping the scales” – in buying or selling, the scales were adjusted to the advantage of the agent, while the poor paid more or received less; a form of cheating, a serious form of unethical behavior.

Amos also warned the exploiters of the seductive power of wealth. Scripture scholar, Monika Hellwig, writes: “It's not a question of making a living for one's family, but of accumulating enough to gain power to oppress others.” Plus, the reduction of people to chattel by impoverishing them is a violation of human dignity. Protecting human dignity, made as we are in the image and likeness of God, is a key component of the Social Teaching of the Church.

In the Gospel, Jesus lays out this theme quite clearly: “No servant can serve two masters....you cannot serve both God and money.” In other words, if you put your ultimate focus on accumulating wealth and power you have displaced God in your heart.

Some Personal Reflections

My mother and father placed a strong emphasis on the virtue of honesty. My dad was a natural-born salesman. I remember him telling me, when I was in high school,

“Don't exaggerate the value or quality of the product you are selling; it's a form of lying.”

I began teaching ethics when I lived in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I had a ministry to business people called, “Spirituality and Ethics” there. Companies and a business association in the oil and natural gas industries hired me to give classes on ethics.

The definition of ethics that I stressed was – a set of moral principles of right conduct; a system of moral values (Canadian Dictionary).

There are two dimensions to ethics: the Ethics of Being – what is in a person's heart – and the Ethics of Doing – a person's conduct. The goal is the integration of these two dimensions, and in a consistent way.

A teaching tool that was very effective in my classes – and one that the businessmen of the prophet Amos' time could have benefitted from studying – was developed by

PAGE TWO

Professor Lawrence Kolberg and one of his students at Harvard, Carol Gilligan. It is called the "Six Stages of Moral Development." They are:

STAGE ONE: What can I get away with?

STAGE TWO: What's in it for me?

STAGE THREE: How will this decision affect my relationships?

STAGE FOUR: How does this decision maintain fairness, order, and uphold the law?

STAGE FIVE: What are my responsibilities to others and to society?

STAGE SIX: What do I believe is the truly right thing to do?

This is an excellent tool to pass on to one's children and grandchildren.

CONCLUSION

Rather than give in to negative thoughts about the unethical and unjust behavior of some people in the business world, in politics, or in the church, St. Paul encourages us in the Second Reading to pray for them, for their conversion (and for ours, if we need it) for, "God wants everyone to be saved and to live truth filled lives."

So, we pray.

Teach us, Lord,
to love all our brothers and sisters in the world;
Help us to live lives of authenticity and in the
spirit of the Beatitudes,
with a special emphasis on justice and peace.
AMEN.

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