

FIRST FRIDAY HOMILY – March 6, 2020

“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The scribes and Pharisees equated righteousness with satisfying the outward observance of the law. In other words, obedience to a set of laws – 613 of them in the Torah. Their righteousness had very little to do with relationships with others.

I would suspect that many of us, when we were young, we viewed obedience as a response to avoid being punished. We obeyed the laws of the house because otherwise something would happen to us if we didn't. We also thought we were good just by merely obeying our parents or our superiors. This mind set was all about assenting to rule of law....instead of a person.

Let's look at the Ten Commandments, for example. They constitute the foundation of the moral order which God revealed to his people. They mirror ethical guidelines that through reflection, we can easily make an examination of conscience. These commandments keep us in check protecting us from great moral evils. Following the Ten Commandments help us resist our disordered tendencies towards sin.

In the Gospel, at first glance, Jesus seems to challenge the Old Law when he calls out: “But I say to you...” However, we know that he did not intend to take away “the smallest letter from the law.” In fact, if we go back to the beginning of this Sermon on the Mount, we find the Beatitudes and through them, understand that Jesus wanted to go beyond the basic rules, beyond a law that prevents a man from sinning. Jesus wanted to redeem, to renew, to re-create us. Indeed, the ultimate purpose of God's covenant with us is to lead all humanity to his true fullness. And that fullness consists of more than following rules and restraining from falling into temptation. It constitutes a new life.

This New Law becomes a part of us in Baptism. This New Law is within us – a law which has its life in the silent whisper of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, who not only informs us, but empowers us to love the good...to be whom we have been created to be. Thus, Jesus did not only demand higher standards by giving us a New Law, but he also empowered us to fulfill them. This is our Christian faith: we live a new life in Christ. He lives in us. His love can spread in our hearts, and thereby we come fully alive. Our true potential is not activated by avoiding the big sins. We come fully alive and whole when we live in Christ and Christ lives in us. This is where the season of Lent leads us if taken seriously.

A life in Jesus is ultimately about closing the gap between being good and being holy, making the leap from merely controlling our tendency for doing evil to fostering and nourishing our tendency for doing good, for living a holy life. This leap, this transformation into a truly virtuous person, is not the result of an external law; it is not the result of the Old Law.

It is the result of living the New Commandment. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.”

Again, this commandment...this law...is about a right relationship that comes from an ordered desire toward love.

Holiness or our own righteousness is never farther than the depths of our heart in its intentions of love. My holiness is never farther than the presence of another person—who comes into the sound of my voice, the glance of my face, the action of my hands. Our holiness is measured in our reaction to people and comes from a desire to love.

The season of Lent affords each of us the opportunity to reflect and pray about how we live out a life of obedience. Is it adherence to laws out of fear of being punished? Or does our obedience come from a place of love?

There are plenty of opportunities to look at our own righteousness....our own holiness.....and our own desires. The family community is a good place where we might learn this love....and grow to a maturity of heart.....where our capacity to love and accept others widens out into the wider community (whatever that community looks like). And perhaps the family community is also a place where we might learn what true obedience is about.....and what kind of heart is necessary to embrace it.

“And it was thus that he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a cross.”
This is the truest example of right relationship....the obedience of Jesus....grounded in his love and his desire to love the Father.

This very love is offered to us now in this Holy Eucharist. Through it, may our capacity to love widen and deepen following the example of the One who first loved us.