

The Paper Pulpit

(Reflections from the Pastor)

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. Jesus challenged us with those words and there is more in them than first meets the eye. How is God compassionate? Jesus defines this for us: God lets his sun shine on the bad as well as the good. God's love doesn't discriminate, it simply embraces everything. Like the sun, it doesn't shine selectively, shedding its warmth on the vegetables because they are good and refusing its warmth to the weeds because they are bad. It just shines and everything, irrespective of its condition, receives its warmth.

That's a stunning truth: God loves us when we are good and God loves us when we are bad. The father of the prodigal son and the older brother loves both, one in his weakness and the other in his bitterness, and his embrace is not contingent upon their conversion. He loves them even inside their distance from him. And we are asked to love in the same way. How do we do that? First of all, it poses this question: If God loves us equally when we are bad and when we are good, then why be good? Other than the fear of hell! This is an interesting question, though not a deep one. Love, understood properly, is never a reward for being good. Instead goodness is always a consequence of having been loved. We aren't loved because we are good, but hopefully we become good because we experience love.

But how do we, like God, embrace indiscriminately? How do we let our love shine on the bad as well as the good, without saying that nothing matters, that it is okay to live in any way and do anything thing you want, anytime you want with anyone you want? How do we love as God loves and still hold true to who we are and what our values are? We do so by holding our personal and moral ground in a gracious and loving way. And for this, we have Jesus' example. He embraced everyone, sinners and saints alike, without ever suggesting that sin and virtue aren't important. Indeed, a truly loving embrace suggests the reverse.

Let's take an example: Imagine that your college-aged daughter comes home for a weekend, along with her boyfriend. You already know they are living together, but the awkward question still arises: Do you challenge them to sleep in separate rooms while they are at your house? You do and your answer is clear, you tell your daughter, gently but unequivocally, that while they are under your roof and unmarried they will sleep in separate rooms. She objects, "That's hypocritical, my values aren't the same as yours, and I don't believe this is wrong in any way!" Your response is the non-discriminating, discriminating embrace of Jesus: You hug your daughter and tell her you love her, you know that she is already sleeping with her boyfriend, but that she may not do so in your house under your roof. Everything inside of your body language, your embrace and your person will clearly tell her two things: "I love you, you're my daughter, I will always love you no matter what. But I don't agree with you on this matter."

Your embrace doesn't say, "I agree with you!", it simply says, "I love you!" and the affirmation of your love, even as you hold your personal and moral ground will, perhaps more than anything else you can offer her, invite her to reflect upon your moral ground and why you hold certain things so deeply. This kind of embrace which radiates a wide compassion and understanding even as it holds your moral ground is needed not just in families and friendships, but in every area of life.

There is a time to stand up for what we believe in, a time to be prophetic, a time to draw a line in the sand, a time to point out differences and the consequences of that, and a time to stand in strong opposition to values and forces that threaten what we hold dear. But there is also a time to embrace across differences, to recognize we can love and respect each other even when we don't hold the same values, when what is common to us eclipses our differences.

There is a time to be compassionate as God is compassionate, to let our sun shine indiscriminately, on both the vegetables and the weeds without denying which is which.

Packer tickets: Interested in two tickets to see the Green Bay Packers play? I have two tickets to each of the following home games: Kansas City Chiefs-August 28, New York Jets-September 14, Carolina Panthers-October 19, Chicago Bears-November 9, New England Patriots-November 30, Atlanta Falcons-December 8 and Detroit Lions-December 28. Tickets are available either by bid or by need. If you would like to make a bid on any games, please send me an email with your bid by July 29th. If you are the highest bidder, you get the tickets. I will also make a couple of games available for those wanting to go to a game but may not be able to afford it. If you or someone you know would like to go to the game, let me know by email by July 29th. My email address is frjim@stmaxkolbe.org.

Sincerely in Christ, Fr. Jim Trempe