

I came across a quote on the Internet this week from Abraham Lincoln. He said: “The problem with quotes on the Internet is that one has no way of knowing if they are authentic or not.”

And apparently there are 2 types of flu. The harmless one that women and children get, and the ‘near death’ version that men get. I’ve had that one!

OK, let’s deal with today’s gospel. This text takes us back to Genesis because it deals with the original purpose of God’s creation, the ordering of right relationships and use of resources so that all creation may experience wholeness. It takes us back to the Old Testament covenant with God’s people which included the expectation to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. It takes us back to the beginning of Matthew’s gospel when Matthew describes in the Sermon on the Mount what the kingdom is about, what righteousness is about.

What Matthew does is lay out some critical decisions disciples must make if they want to follow Jesus. In doing so, he constantly reminds them of the resistance they will face, the same resistance the prophets faced, that Jesus faced. Matthew is saying, let’s look at the end in order to give meaning to the present. It is like a teacher telling the students at the beginning of the semester what’s going to be on the final exam so they can know what is really important to remember along the way. Matthew is telling us what kind of testing or evaluation will be in the finals.

And we find that we are accountable – it makes a difference how we live. We also hear the final exam is simple, but it is not easy. Give food to the hungry. Give water to the thirsty. Welcome the stranger. Clothe the naked. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. It’s so simple it’s almost an insult. And to add to the insult, the list is repeated four times in 10 verses. Nowhere else in the Bible is something repeated four times in 10 verses. Nowhere else in the sayings of Jesus do we find this detailed description of the last judgment. We don’t have to sift through volumes of theology or long chapters of introduction to get at the meaning of what the kingdom is about. What God wants from us is kindness, love of neighbor. What the righteousness, the justice of God is about is helping people who are in need. The church’s mission is to reorder relationships and resources so that those on the bottom rung, the forgotten ones, are included in the blessings of creation, just like Genesis and the Garden of Eden. Harmony. The kingdom is about people helping people. It is bringing healing and harmony where there is hurt and discord. It is simple, but not easy.

Also, it must be noted that this story of how we are to be judged – from the lips of Jesus Himself – makes no mention of church attendance, sexual morality, correct dogma or right worship. It’s simple. It’s about people. People in need. And our response – or lack of response – to them. We know what’s on the final exam. (adapted from SERMONS.COM, sermon by George Johnson, p. 1-6)

Second, let’s tease this out a bit. You’ve heard me quote Daniel Berrigan, who said that “Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find a strong religious challenge to always welcome the stranger, the foreigner. This was emphasized for 2 reasons: First, because the Jewish people themselves had once been foreigners and immigrants, which should resonate deeply with all of us who are NOT Native Americans! Our ancestors were all foreigners and immigrants. The Jewish scriptures kept reminding the Israelites not to forget that. Second, they believed that God’s revelation, most often, comes to us through the stranger, in what’s foreign to us.

The great prophets developed this further. They taught that God favors the poor preferentially and that consequently we will be judged by how we treat the poor. The Second Vatican Council enshrined this

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teaching in its document on the church by saying that the church has a preferential option for the poor. The prophets coined this mantra: *The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land; and the quality of justice in the land will always be judged by how orphans, widows, and strangers fare while you are alive.*

*Orphans, widows, and strangers!* That's scriptural code for those who, at any given time, are the three most vulnerable groups in society. And the prophets' message didn't go down easy. Rather it was a religious affront to many of the pious at the time who strongly believed that we will be judged religiously and morally by the rigor and strictness of our religious observance, our sexual morality. Then, like now, social justice was often religiously marginalized.

But Jesus sides with the Hebrew prophets. For Him, God not only makes a preferential option for the poor, but GOD IS IN THE POOR. How we treat the poor is how we treat God. Moreover the prophets' mantra, that we will be judged by how we treat the poor, is given a normative expression in this discourse on the final judgement.

What's the final test? How will be judged? Jesus' answer is stunning and is perhaps the most challenging text in the Gospels. He tells us that we will be judged, seemingly solely, on the basis of how we treated the poor, that is, on how we have treated the most vulnerable among us. Moreover at one point, he singles out 'the stranger,' the foreigner, the refugee: "I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU MADE ME WELCOME....or YOU NEVER MADE ME WELCOME." We end up on the right or wrong side of God on the basis of how we treat the stranger. Good luck trying to argue with God about laws and lines. He's not going to buy it; the teaching is clear.

Third, what also needs to be highlighted in this text about the last judgment is that neither group, those who got it right and those who got it wrong, knew what they were doing. Both initially protest: the first by saying: "We didn't know it was you we were serving" and the second by saying: "Had we known it was you we would have responded." Both protests are beside the point. In Matthew's Gospel, mature discipleship doesn't depend upon us believing that we have it right, it depends only upon us doing it right. We will be judged on right action, not right belief.

These scriptural principles are so important today in the face of the refugee and immigrant issues we are facing throughout the world. Today, without doubt, we are facing the biggest humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War. Millions upon millions of people, under persecution and the threat of death, are being driven from their homes and homelands with no place to go and no country or community to receive them. As Christians we may not turn our backs on them or turn them away. If Jesus is to be believed, we will be judged more by how we treat refugees than by whether or not we are going to church. When we stand before God in judgment and say in protest: "When did I see you a stranger and not welcome you?" Our generation is likely to hear: "I was a Syrian refugee, a Palestinian living in the Gaza Strip, and you did not welcome me." "I was fleeing violence and the drug cartel in my home country, and you did not welcome me."

Many in our country dismiss this as naïve, over-idealistic, and simplistic. The issue of refugees and immigrants is both highly sensitive and very complex. Countries have borders that need to be respected and defended, just as its citizens have a right to be protected. Admittedly, there are very real political, social, economic, and security issues that have to be addressed. But, as we, our churches, and our governments, address them we must remain clear on what the scriptures, Jesus, and the teaching of the church uncompromisingly insist: We are to welcome the stranger, irrespective of inconvenience, expense, or even dangers.

For all sorts of pragmatic reasons, political, social, economic, and security, people will justify not welcoming the stranger. But this gospel makes it clear that there will be an accounting for it. We've been told what's on the final exam. We know how to pass. We have to have the will to do it. Amen. (last 2 points adapted from Rolheiser, posting of Feb 13, 2017)

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