

Homily for the Red Mass – October 12, 2016
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament

It is worth noting that the conversation among Jesus, the Pharisees, and the Scribes in the gospel this evening took place in the context of a meal (Lk. 11.42-46). Jesus was the invited guest at the home of one of the Pharisees. Almost from the very beginning of the gathering this debate began over the observance of the law.

In the course of this exchange Jesus made the following statement to his hosts, “You pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others.” The Pharisees were concerned with the careful, even minute, observance of law. Jesus did not discard the pious practice of the law but insisted in something deeper. He spoke of judgment and love for God.

The Greek word translated to judgment in this text is also the word for justice, *krisin*. Looking at the various applications of this word in both Matthew and Luke it is apparent that the judgment of God which renders divine justice is implied. So, applying the word as judgment in this context was intended to remind the Pharisees, and the readers of this gospel, that the standard of justice will always be weighed on divine scales and judged in God’s eyes.

The Greek word for love in this text is *agape*, meaning a selfless, preferential love whose only object is God. It also connotes a love-feast. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees of a radical sacrificial love for God, whose desire for the divine would consume an individual. This is also a more authentic interpretation of the word charity.

Jesus argued with his hosts to orient them in the true meaning and purpose of the Law. He wanted to restore the covenant as a communion of shared life between God and His people. An authentic, faithful observance of the Law was meant to lead one to the awesome sense of God's justice and to stir in the believer a zealous, burning desire for God. The Pharisees had distorted this purpose. The Law became an end in itself. This Pharisaic inclination swapped fidelity to God for a compliance with the Law.

The tragic irony of this conversation is that it took place at a meal. To be gathered together with Jesus could have been a foretaste of that *agape*, the love-feast of the kingdom. This did not happen. Even more tragically, the Mosaic Law, designed by God for the covenant with His people would be used to judge the Son of God and condemn him to an anguishing death on the cross.

The juxtaposition of judgment and charity which Jesus presented to the Pharisees and the Scribes can confound us as well. We often presume to contrast these two ideas, judgment and charity. They become irreconcilable alternatives. Jesus presented them as complementary dimensions of the Law's purpose. Jesus combined judgment and charity to reveal the awesome, mysterious mercy of God. We come to life only because of His mercy. Our lives are only conducted in the presence of His mercy. The scriptures repeatedly remind us that to live unaware of His merciful gaze is the way of foolishness.

Psalm 94 gives us one example:

They kill the widow and alien;
the orphan they murder.

They say, "The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob takes no notice."

Understand, you stupid people!
You fools, when will you be wise?

Does the one who shaped the ear not hear?
The one who formed the eye not see?

Does the one who guides nations not rebuke?
The one who teaches man not have knowledge?

Our Jewish brothers and sisters – St. John Paul II referred to them as our elder brother – have just begun the Holy Days with

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. One Jewish commentator described it as the day we are closest to God. This closeness brings the two-fold awareness of judgment and charity under the brooding wings of God's powerful mercy. Jesus' words to the Pharisees, as well as to us, reveal such a Yom Kippur moment.

As our state and our nation journey with uncertainty in the days and weeks ahead, we should seek to place ourselves under that sacred canopy, seeking the nearness of God. I presume this gathering of the stewards and guardians of the law are acutely concerned for the social and political outcomes of this momentous democratic process. Like the Pharisee who hosted Jesus at his table, we should invite the Lord to the table of our public and personal deliberations and invite his wise and merciful prodding like that which he candidly shared with his hosts, "You pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others."

Let me respectfully offer one such prodding to ponder. In keeping with the consistent papal teachings, the bishops of the United States in our document, *Faithful Citizenship*, have identified acts of racism as intrinsically moral evils because they violate the sanctity and dignity of human life. We should be mindful of this as we struggle with the social unrest resulting from the use of police force in the African American community. While

the circumstances are varied and often confusing this should not be a motive to discount the factor of race.

Nor is this the only issue where race is a consideration. Race and poverty plays a part in the policies of state-sanctioned abortions, which are always an intrinsically moral evil. It is recognize in the number of those given the death penalty in California and across the nation. These are all destructive patterns of what Pope Francis laments as a “throw-away culture”. The Church’s tradition of pointing to the moral concerns in these burning social issues resonates with the prodding of St. Paul, who sternly told the Corinthians, “All the parts of the body, though many, are one body ... The eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I do not need you.” (I Cor. 12.12-21)

That these are all challenging, complex issues should not tempt our indifference. Evil often weaves its way into our habits and so weaken our resolve to change. The atoning spirit of Yom Kippur can be a grace for us as well.

Much is made in these days of the suitability of the candidates for public office. This is a necessary, though difficult, discernment. As we give ourselves to this sacred civic duty, let us also examine our own suitability for responsibilities of citizenship.

Not just in the matter of voting but even more so in how each of us will engage our city, our state, our country in the vital work of governing for the common good.

The Lord Jesus looks at each of us around his table and encourages us with the words of Paul to the Galatians, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit.” (Gal. 5.18-25)