

HOMILY ~ 31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME NOVEMBER 4/5, 2023

There is a story attributed to the famous anthropologist, Margaret Mead. She was asked by a student what she thought was the earliest sign of a civilized society. They thought she would say tools for hunting, pottery or some types of religious artifacts. Mead replied that the first sign of civilization is a 15,000 year old healed human femur, the long bone that connects the hip to the knee. She explained that wounded animals in the wild would be hunted and eaten before their broken bones could heal. The healed femur is a sign that a wounded person must have received help from others. Remember, 15,000 years ago you did not just drop someone with a broken bone at the hospital. They would have to have had people taking care of them for a prolonged period of time, and that would have come at a personal cost to the people doing the care giving. Mead concluded that helping someone else through a difficult time is where civilization started. I think that this can be described as altruism, which I believe is necessary for a civilized society. Altruism can be defined as exhibiting an unselfish concern for other people, or helping others with no expectation of getting anything in return. I think maybe we do not have enough altruism in our world today.

In the Gospel Reading today, Jesus is criticizing the Scribes and Pharisees. I think he is criticizing them for their total lack of altruism. They made up rules to follow, but they did not follow them themselves. If the rules were good ones, don't you think they would follow them themselves? It looks like they are creating rules that are very hard for the people to follow, not helping them follow the rules and knowing they will fail so the Scribes and Pharisees can criticize them and appear superior to them. No altruism there. All their works were performed for others to see, so they would get credit for them. They were very concerned about how they looked physically to others by widening their phylacteries and lengthening their tassels. They liked places of honor at banquets and seats of honor at the synagogue. Nothing selfless about that.

I think a certain amount of altruism is needed in doing acts of kindness and serving others. I think this is the type of love that Jesus is calling us to. I also think that we are hard-wired for altruism. Recent studies have shown that if you see someone in need and you can help them, there is something inside of us that makes us want to help. Studies have documented changes in the brain that would support this. Of course when you do something for someone else, it feels good and that makes you want to do it more. It also encourages the person who received the act of kindness to pay it forward. People who see these acts of kindness are more likely to repeat them. There are certain personality types that tend to be more altruistic. For example, people who are more empathetic and extraverts are more likely to be altruistic. However, all of us can be more altruistic if we are purposeful about it.

Psychologist put altruism into four categories. The first is genetic altruism. You may be more inclined to be altruistic with family members, but not necessarily. Sometimes that is more difficult. The second is reciprocal altruism that is based upon a give and take relationship. You do something for someone now because they may one day return the favor. The third group is selected altruism, where you may be altruistic with a particular group of people. I would expect the Scribes and Pharisees to practice selected altruism with the Jewish people in their spiritual care, but that does not seem to be the case. The fourth is pure altruism that involves helping someone, even when it is risky, without any reward.

All acts of kindness are good, even in the absence of altruism. However, if there is a total lack of altruism, these acts may become self-serving, as we have seen with the Scribes and the Pharisees. Maybe those acts of kindness are not kind at all. I think what Jesus is calling us to when he talks about loving our neighbor, all of these acts of kindness are good, but I think he is particularly talking about pure altruism ... helping someone, even when it is risky, without any reward. I think we can all work on that.

Love and Peace,

Fr. Jim

