

(08-07-16) 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily by Fr. John Koziol, OFM Conv.

I read a quote recently that caused me to pause:

“It is a very great poverty to decide that a child must die, that you might live as you wish.”
~Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

I’ll be honest...I was unnerved and taken aback by the words of Mother Teresa. They sounded harsh and judgmental.

Of course, I have never, nor would I ever, decide that a child must die so that I might live as I wish. I’m pretty sure that I could say the same thing about this parish and all of you. We have never, nor would we ever, decide that a child must die so that we could live as we wish. We could easily discount this quote and dismiss it as not applicable to us, but maybe we should give it more thought and perhaps our Gospel today invites us to do just that.

What was Mother Teresa’s point? What did she mean by saying that some people actually decide that a child should die in order for another to live as he or she wishes? Mother Teresa’s entire life was dedicated to the poor, the suffering, and the neglected. She gave her life in service to the poorest of the poor. She chose to live a life of solidarity with the poor. She cared for them, begged for them, advocated for them, lived with them, served them, and above all, loved them. She saw Christ in them. She *encountered* Christ in them.

In her daily ministry, Mother Teresa saw children die every day, often in her arms as she consoled and loved them. They died from diseases and from hunger. Mother Teresa believed that there were and *are* sufficient resources in the world that no one should have to go hungry. If we really had the will to do so, we could feed every hungry child in the world, every day. She believed that poverty and its consequences are the result of the choices people make every day. We may not decide that a child should die so that we can live as we wish, but we *do* decide how we spend our money and how we use the resources of the world with which we are blessed...and these decisions have consequences.

Pope Francis has said that when we throw food away, we are stealing from the poor. Our choices *do* matter. The choices we make each day matter. How we decide to spend our money matters. I read once that any time we are making a decision to spend our money, we should ask ourselves, “How will this decision affect the poor?”

Let me recall a true story about Mother Teresa to illustrate this point. Mother Teresa received the highest award that the Knights of Columbus gives. She was invited to New York to receive the award which included a gift of one million dollars for her ministry. The award would be given at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in Manhattan during a grand banquet. She told the head of the Knights that she would go to the hotel to receive the award, but she would not stay for the banquet. She thought the money being spent on the banquet should be given to the poor. The Knights ended up giving her, not only the award and the million dollars, but also the equivalent amount that was spent on the banquet. She *still* didn’t stay for dinner!

I think we are all guilty of not paying much attention to the poor. I know I am. We all fail to take into consideration how our everyday choices affect the poor. We shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves though. It is difficult to fathom the affects our everyday decisions make in the global reality of poverty and need. We are not trained to think in those terms. We often operate out of ignorance. How many of us take into consideration where the clothes we buy are manufactured or the coffee we drink is grown, and how the workers there are treated? Are they paid a fair wage? Are they treated justly? Do they receive enough money to feed their families?

But perhaps the bigger problem has to do with the topic of the Scriptures last week and this week; namely, greed and the temptation to amass material possessions and money. This is a major problem for us who live in a wealthy nation. We have been indoctrinated to be consumers, to want more, and to want the newest and the best. In addition, we are very fearful of not having enough. It's kind of ironic, isn't it? We have so much and we fear not having enough. We can become stingy with our money and resources. We can easily become the man whom Jesus spoke about in last week's Gospel.

His harvest was so great that he did not have enough space in his barns to hold it all, so he tore his barns down and built bigger ones. He filled these barns with the amazing harvest and said to himself, "How blessed I am; I have enough for myself for years to come. I can rest, eat, drink and be merry." That night he died. How foolish he was.

And his foolishness was not just his greed. The greater foolishness is that he was selfish and was concerned only about himself and, thus, he refused to share with the poor. How many children did he decide should die so that he could live as he wished?

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that amassing possessions and wealth are a dead-end and is not what life is all about. He exhorts us to live in this world, focused on the things that are eternal. He also clearly tells us not to be afraid; to be generous in giving away what we have to the poor. After all, He says, God has already given us the greatest of all treasures, the Kingdom of God.

"Do not be afraid any longer, little flock,
for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.
Sell your belongings and give alms.
Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out,
an inexhaustible treasure in heaven
that no thief can reach nor moth destroy.
For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be."

We all know that when we die, we can't take our possessions or our money with us. What we take with us are the good deeds and loving actions that we offered during our lifetimes. The Gospel today presents us with this question: How are the followers of Jesus to spend the time given to them between His first coming and His final coming? The answer is clear. We are to be those faithful, good and loving servants who spend our lives, not amassing wealth and possessions for ourselves, but spend our lives loving and caring for the poor and those in need. We are to spend that time making decisions that will allow others to eat and to thrive, rather than be hungry and die. We are to make deliberate and intentional decisions to be believers who follow the Master's command to love our neighbor as ourselves, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to comfort the sick and the dying.

The disciples of Jesus are not to regard the poor as an economic burden but, rather, as an opportunity to encounter Christ Himself, for when we serve the poor, we are serving Christ. I'm sure none of us would ever intentionally decide to let a child die so that we can live as we wish. Perhaps we just need to pay more attention to how our lifestyles, our economic decisions, and our everyday choices affect the poor. Perhaps we need to take another look at how generously we share our blessings with the poor.

"Blessed are those servants
whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival.
Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself,
have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them."
May we be those servants!