Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

October 16, 2011

Some things never change. The controversy in today’s gospel about paying taxes reminds us that the fiery debate that now rages between Republicans and Democrats is as old as the hills of Palestine. You remember what happened when King George decided to tax the tea of the American colonists. It was the spark that ignited the Revolutionary War.

Rumblings of another revolutionary war are now being heard in our land. The Democrats claim that the rich are not being taxed enough while the Republicans argue that budget cuts, not taxes, are the answer. Weary with the rhetoric of both sides, we now have the Tea Party in a big part of the country and Occupy Seattle in Westlake Square.

I’m not a politician, but as I listen to the angry voices raised over the issues of taxes, I’m reminded of something I do know as a social psychologist. It is called “cognitive dissonance,” a fancy name for basic human behavior. Psychologists tell us that people are capable of holding together two beliefs that seem to be incompatible.

For example, parents could, on the one hand, teach their kids that stealing is a sin, but, on the other hand, carry home from their workplace items that do not belong to them. Another example might be the Catholic parent who insists that their children go to church, but never darken the doors of the church themselves. You get the picture. We are capable, the psychologists tell us, of divided hearts.

I believe cognitive dissonance is one way in which we can explain our current budget crisis and a lot of other crises that bog our nation down. We Americans, whether rich *or* poor, want services and goods but don’t want to pay for them. We want a big party but don’t want to pay the caterer. We want good music but we can’t afford to pay the musicians. We want to build low income housing for the homeless, as long as they’re not built next door to where we live. We want government to serve us, but we’re not willing to pay for the services.

Long before there was the term “cognitive dissonance,” there was the reality. That reality is reflected in today’s gospel. The people of Jesus’ time were burdened by divided hearts. As Jews they owed their allegiance to God alone, whom they were to love with their whole heart, soul and mind. But their land was occupied by the Romans who also demanded allegiance, and, worst of all, the dreaded tax.

And so the religious leaders of the people come to Jesus with the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” Matthew is careful to tell us that these people were asking that question in bad faith. They were really out to trip Jesus up. They put him between a rock and a hard place. If he said it was okay to pay taxes to Caesar, they would have accused him of blasphemy, because he accepted Caesar over God. If Jesus had said that one didn’t have to pay taxes, the religious leaders would have run to the Romans and accused him of trying to overcome the government. What’s a Messiah to do?

Jesus chose to answer their question with another question. “Since I don’t have any,” he said, “does anyone of you have a Roman coin used to pay taxes?” Immediately, someone in the crowd reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. A coin with the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, the high priest.” Now Jesus could have been much more blunt when he saw that coin. He could have said, “Well, I see that you, who are so troubled with the Roman government, have no trouble carrying and using its coins.”

Instead, Jesus simply said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.” In other words, Jesus invited his questioners to look honestly at their divided hearts, at their own “cognitive dissonance.”

Now I don’t expect that an eight minute homily will solve complex social problems. What I do expect is that a homily will raise awareness, raise consciousness, among parishioners. Specifically, I recommend that, once a preacher has laid out certain issues of justice, a parish will gather (as we do today in our Candidates Forum) to put flesh on these bones, to take the process the next step by asking three questions: 1) what are the justice issues that clamor for immediate attention in our area? 2) what resources can we command to address these issues? 3) since we cannot do everything, what in the concrete shall we do?

Have I wandered from today’s liturgical readings? Not entirely. St. Paul is writing to the Christians of Thessalonica, a thriving commercial center, not unlike Seattle. He is convinced that their Christian life takes place under the providence of God. In that context he tells them how he constantly remembers in prayer three aspects of their Christian living: their active faith; their love expressed in actions that at times are quite difficult; and their steady hope, their patient expectations, despite the challenges of society.

We come to the Eucharist as people often caught in the middle, caught between allegiance to God and to the gods of our time. Jesus is still inviting us to examine our divided hearts. It is precisely these free gifts of God – dynamic faith, manifested love, and steady hope – that urge each of us today to look beyond our own individual households, despite the tribulations that trouble us, and to extend our hands to those cut off from so much that makes life human, livable, enjoyable. “Give to God what is God’s” means to give, as Jesus did, when *he* was caught in the middle.

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