

Ezekiel 34:15 & 16. Matthew 25:40

I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy.

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

THE LEAST OF THESE

God, you know that I am a hypocrite, but don't you think that putting the basis for most of my hypocrisy into two of today's readings is overkill? I know that I am to respond to the weak, the broken in spirit, the oppressed and the needy. It is just that I don't know how to do it and when the rare instance of me trying does arise, I am not very good at it. Just who are the least of these, anyway? I can see the homeless person, begging by the roadside and I have seen video-tape of migrants trying to get into the U.S. I have been in southeast Asia and in Cambodia I remember being approached by a woman holding a tiny naked dead baby in her arms. I certainly gave her some U.S. dollars. Only to be told by my driver that the hospital made a few extra dollars renting out the bodies of dead babies by the hour. He said save your money for the musicians at Angkor Wat who all have been crippled by land mine explosions.

If I move away from personal experience and look at statistics, I am simply overwhelmed. How do I respond to the fact that 38.29 million people in the U.S. are living in food insecure households or that the upper one tenth of one per cent of households control 12.8 per cent of all wealth in this country while the bottom 50 per cent of households account for only 2.4 per cent of U.S. wealth? Do I become a socialist and demand radical wealth redistribution? Or a conservative and say things are alright just the way they are. Or an evangelical possibly maintaining that income inequality is God's will. I really don't like my alternatives.

It seems that we are presented with two sets of responses: On the one end of the continuum is the religiously trite. Love your neighbor and remember that the whole world is your neighbor. I am fine with that, just so long as it doesn't cost me anything. On the other end of the solution continuum are all the highly charged political answers. I am fine with that too; so long as I don't have to kill anyone. Well, maybe a few. Like the Lord High Executioner in the Mikado, I have a little list and none of them would be missed. Isn't there an answer somewhere between trite and revolution?

I think that there is: A Jesus centered solution to the problem of identifying and assisting the Least of These. It is not a new proposal. Fifty years ago, it was a strong movement in the Roman Church in Latin

America and was part of the civil rights movement in the U.S. It was called the social gospel. It maintained that the Beatitudes of the New Testament could only be addressed through institutional change. The institutions to be changed were economic and political. For those of us who lived where primary relationships were most important, substantial institutional change seemed more political than spiritual.

From the time I was ten until sixteen, I spent my summers on a ranch in central Montana. A mile from the ranch was the tiny village of Brooks which boasted a general store and two grain elevators. One elevator was run by a Lutheran and the other by a Catholic. During the off-season elevators were one person operations. If either operator were sick, the person from the other elevator would take over. Competition took a back seat to primary relations. The priest and pastor followed much the same example. They had long ago found that there were no local theological divides that could not be bridged by a stein of beer and a few kolaches. Primary relationships solved most community problems. Institutional change, indeed, institutions themselves, were viewed with suspicion.

For the most part, we no longer live in such an environment. We still view primary relationships as important, but they are inadequate to fix the social problems of a mass society. So, we are back to a new view of the social gospel. A view that is Jesus centered, but relevant for change in the larger society. I call this the wholistic social gospel. It calls for the recognition of individual responsibility for the care of others, the least of these. But it charges us as individuals to address social problems with all the tools at our command. Tools which range from individuals helping one another in a very direct one on one fashion to using one's vote to influence public policy.

Addressing the needs of the least of these, is not a partisan political question. We are commanded by Jesus to care for the poor and disadvantaged. How this is done is a partisan question. At the very least, we need to debate the issue without demonizing the least among us. . . Jimmy Carter summed it up well.

I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can, with whatever I have to try to make a difference. Amen.