

Homily for the XXXII Sunday of the Year (B) 2018

“Learning How, Not Only What”

When Jesus points out the widow’s action in the temple, why does He do that? Clearly, he wants his disciples to notice what she does, and to understand something: But what?

Often this story is used to explore the meaning of trust in God (the widow put in both coins, not just one); or generosity (in contrast to the offerings made by the wealthy, as Jesus Himself says); or – rarely, but especially important today – the suspicion that religious leaders are self-serving and act piously only for show.

All these are useful lessons, but I want to dig deeper with you, because there’s something here we need to learn especially today. It has to do with the large-scale failure of religious education, including the one that you may well have experienced. For whatever reason, our church has focused greatly on the “what” of being a believer – what to believe, what to do, what to avoid doing – but hasn’t been at all good at teaching the “how” of becoming an effective disciple. Let me give a simple illustration.

When I hear confessions I often hear people confess that they’re having a hard time forgiving someone – very common. Note two things: First, people have grasped the correct “what”: Followers of Jesus are supposed to forgive people who wrong us. But so many people haven’t learned – haven’t been taught – the “how.” Just what steps do I take to forgive someone? I know the “what”; how do I do it? What’s the “how”?

This comes from what I’ve heard called the “Cinderella assumption” about how to be a follower of Jesus: that all good comes from Divine Grace, which acts like a fairy godmother to rescue us, while we’re powerless ourselves. In contrast, Jesus is very clear – and today is an example – that the people who are with him (note that we call them the “disciples,” people who have subjected themselves to a discipline of learning from a master) have to learn not only a “what” about living as a disciple but also a “how.” And the “how” is always learned by observing carefully what a “master” does, and imitating it in order to understand it and to have it become a practice of our own. In the woman in the temple, Jesus notices a “master” of trust in God; if the disciples are to learn to trust God deeply, they now have an opportunity even His words along can’t convey. Jesus tells them that they have to notice her, observe her, understand her actions and her reasons, and then imitate her so that they can master that skill of trust she’s demonstrating for them. We haven’t by and large, helped sincere Christians even to understand that we need to do that.

Let’s take another example, this one from the news only a few weeks ago.

When Robert Bowers was brought into the emergency room in Pittsburgh a few Saturdays ago after killing eleven people at the Tree of Life Synagogue, he was shouting, “I want to kill all the Jews.” The emergency-room staff treated him as if he were any other person in need of their skills, even though some of them were themselves Jewish. That’s one of the things health-care-workers learn about the “how” of their profession. They learn it because they’re taught it, in large part by watching others do it during their training. And more: A few days later, with Bowers’s condition stabilized, Dr. Jeffrey Cohen, the hospital’s president who is himself Jewish

and a member of Tree of Life congregation, stopped in to see how he was doing and had a brief chat with him. Cohen described later why he did that. He said that one of the things he tries to teach his staff is the value of communication, even when it's difficult. And if he wanted them to learn how to communicate well in difficult situations, they had to see it practiced. His leadership depended on not just "saying the 'what'," but "showing the 'how'."

There's a story about how Saint Anthony of the Desert, considered one of the greatest saints among the desert hermits, worked to become closer to Christ. Anthony would, the story goes, hear about another monk who was noted for, say, his humility; so Anthony would visit and stay with that monk, observing carefully how the monk practiced humility and trying to imitate it. After weeks or months, having gained that skill, Anthony would seek out another monk revered for a different virtue; he would then visit and stay with that monk until he had learned how to do that other skill of Christian living habitually; and so on. That was his way to mastery of the skills of Christian discipleship so he could grow closer to being a faithful and effective disciple of Christ. Notice. Observe. Imitate.

Another quick story: When Saint Teresa of Avila was asked whether she would prefer to go to confession to a priest who had a reputation for holiness, or to one who had a reputation for competence, she chose the second without a moment's hesitation. She wanted to go where she could best learn the "how."

Now why am I telling these stories? Because they at least suggest an answer to the question, "What do I do to become a better disciple?" The answer, as Jesus points out in the Gospel, is one that too few people have even heard about: Look for people who seem to have mastered a skill you need to learn – forgiving others, being chaste, being patient, being generous to the poor – any of the things that we had the "what" of discipleship drilled in to us, but we don't yet know how to do well. Our habitual sins will show us what we need to learn. Observe what those people who are better at it do, and don't do, and try to understand why. Imitate the "how" they do it, over and over. That's what "imitating the saints" means in everyday choices.

Becoming an effective disciple depends on God's grace, but God doesn't work like a fairy godmother. We need to cooperate with God's invitations, which He gives us by the examples he sends us.

So take home from Mass today not only the stories of a few masters – the widow, the nurses and doctors in Pittsburgh, Saint Anthony, Saint Theresa – But also a new skill that Jesus was teaching to the Twelve: We become effective disciples by noticing, observing, and imitating people who are better at the virtues of living in and for God than we now are. God is sending those people; we need to be on the lookout.