

Gospel: Luke 14:1-6

On a sabbath Jesus went to dine
at the home of one of the leading Pharisees,
and the people there were observing him carefully.
In front of him there was a man suffering from dropsy.
Jesus spoke to the scholars of the law and Pharisees in reply, asking,
"Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath or not?"
But they kept silent; so he took the man and,
after he had healed him, dismissed him.
Then he said to them
"Who among you, if your son or ox falls into a cistern,
would not immediately pull him out on the sabbath day?"
But they were unable to answer his question.

Homily: Are You Living a Merciful life?

Once again in this section from Luke 14, we find Jesus embroiled in yet another religious controversy, and there is a setup. One of the leading Pharisees invites Him to his home for dinner, but it's not a request that comes out of graciousness, it's an opportunity that the Pharisees have setup to try and trap Jesus. The story as we just heard it unfold is, there's a man who is suffering from dropsy. It's interesting that the healing in this story is almost incidental. The way that St. Luke tells a story is: Jesus asks this question, "Is it lawful for me to heal or not?" They don't say anything and then St. Luke says, "And after He had healed the man with dropsy, He puts this question to the Scribes and Pharisees..." That's the main point. This is a religious conflict; a religious debate over what's the nature of our faith; what's the nature of religion.

The Scribes and the Pharisees are filled with self-righteousness. You've heard me say this many times, and there are so many instances of this in the Scripture because the Scribes and the Pharisees believe we earn salvation—we merit salvation—by our good deeds; by our charitable works. We do these things and then I deserve Heaven. I deserve God's grace because I'm a righteous person. Nothing could be further from the truth. Salvation is a free gift that's given to all of us, and none of us earn it.

If we fall into that trap of thinking that we're earning our salvation, then we're no better than the Scribes and the Pharisees. The question that Jesus puts in today's Gospel is, which of you—if someone or something that you value is in danger—a child, or an animal, or some valuable possession—would not bend the law and do whatever you need to do to be able to save that person or that thing that you care about? This isn't just about 2,000 years ago. It's also about the way the system works today. It's easy for us to be critical of those other people when the other people are the other people. But when it's your child that's arrested for a DUI, or if it's your spouse, or if it's yourself, which of us doesn't hire the best lawyer we can to get the least amount of punishment doled out? Or have the lawyer grease the gears of justice, so that those that we care about receive mercy?

Or which among us, if somebody's applying for a job and we know somebody in that position, don't talk to a person of influence to put in a good word for them? Jesus says we all do that. We bend the rules when it's to our advantage. And we feel good about that. We say, "That's an act of mercy." But when it's somebody else—and that's the point of the controversy today—well then we say: *These are the rules and they have to be strictly applied. Our society is gonna fall apart if we don't have rules.* And that's true. Jesus isn't saying, "Throw out the rules." But He is saying, "Apply the rules with mercy and compassion. Show the same mercy and compassion to somebody else that you would want shown to you." That's very difficult for us to do because so often we look at the other with suspicion.

We have an extraordinary example in our first reading from Paul's letter to the Romans today, Chapter 9. Paul is a Pharisee. Paul is schooled in the Law. His family are Jews. So many of his friends are Jews. All of the early Christians, of course, were Jews. And St. Paul has this agony in his heart because he looks at his fellow Jews and he says, "They don't know Christ." And he said, "It tears my heart apart. I'm to the point where I would be willing to risk my own salvation; to go into hell myself if it would mean that my brethren would come to know Christ." That's extraordinary isn't it? But perhaps you have a child that's in great need, or you have a family member that's in great need? To use Jesus' analogy in the Gospel, and what St. Paul is talking about in the Letter to the Romans, would you not be willing to give up your life, and everything you've worked for, for the sake of your child, if it would mean bringing your child to a knowledge of Jesus, or bringing that child back to health?

Wouldn't you give away everything that you own if it meant paying for the medical bills for your child? Or saving your child from addiction? Or bringing your child out of a life of sin? If you really love that child—and I know many of you have that kind of love for your family members—you say, "I would give it all away if it would really make a difference in the life of a loved one." If that's the way that we love our own, we, brothers and sisters, are God's chosen ones.

The heart of the Gospel is mercy. The truth of the incarnation is that God sends His own into the world to save us. It's what St. Paul is talking about, magnified infinitely. It's what Jesus is talking about in terms of the heart of the Law is mercy. It's what Pope Francis has been talking about since day one in his papacy. Pope Francis isn't talking about: *Let's throw out the rules of the Catholic Church. Let's throw out our dogma.* That's not the point. The point is, the rules have to be applied with mercy.

The Bishops and the Cardinals in the Catholic Church know that. The most terrible scandal of the last hundred years is the clergy sex abuse scandal. It's ripped the Catholic Church apart. So many of our young adults don't believe in the Catholic Church anymore because of that scandal. But what Bishop has gone to jail for failure to apply the law? What Cardinal of the Church has ever been prosecuted because of his failure to do what is right in the face of this terrible scandal? Not a single Bishop; not a single Cardinal. Why? Because they are protected by Canon Law.

That's what Jesus is talking about. When you're in the system, then the system works to your advantage and you're protected...If you're the lawyer, if you're the judge, if you're the politician... So we debate about healthcare, but Congress has its own healthcare system. The very healthcare

system that is debated for everybody else doesn't apply to Congress because Congress has its own system. Because they make the laws. That's exactly what Jesus is talking about here today to the Scribes and Pharisees: *You're looking down your nose at everybody else. You're laying these heavy burdens, but when it comes to you, you can always find a loophole; you can always find an exception because it's your own, or because it's yourself.*

We all do this. When we're looking at it from our side, somehow, it's different. What Jesus is calling us to is this compassion and mercy; to see the other as our self. The great Saints are those who realize this: That the other is my brother...that the other is my sister. What's revealed through our Christian faith is that the heart of our faith is mercy...mercy...mercy. Let's pray that our own hearts might move to this deeper truth of what Jesus came to reveal.

Amen. (Amen.)