

By Father Charles Bowes

Sirach 27:4-7
1 Corinthians 15:54-58
Luke 6:39-45

We're forgiven – so let's get on with life and be of service.

Is there anything quite so irritating as “constructive criticism?” While taking it well is considered a wonderful character trait, very few of us do. So it is with much satisfaction that we read these words from Saint Luke in which the critic is advised to look to his/her own faults first. In our human experience there is something that just feels right about Jesus coming to the defense of those of us whose little faults would seem to make us quite righteous by comparison.

We positively cheer when someone fights back. I recently heard of a woman whose doctor told her she could stand to lose ten or twenty pounds. The reply, “so could you!” is being repeated far and wide in church circles. It was a great equalizer in a world in which medical personnel can make us feel at fault for being sick and not worthy of the care we would like to have.

The problem is that much of the time the criticism is based on truth. Just because I don't want to hear it and resent the critic, does not mean that I do

not need to lose the weight, curb my tongue, stop procrastinating, be more forgiving, or whatever else I am being urged to do or be. My quick defense may insulate me from the criticism, but it does little for my long-term welfare. Using the words of Jesus to rebuke our critics only continues and perpetuates the cycle.

Jesus' words in Luke chapter 6 are for us as we live in a world of many peoples and cultures, whose ways are different from ours and whose circumstances we cannot know. What may seem to me to be a grave fault, such as always speaking one's mind, may simply be a strong extroverted personality. While it may be true that the person in question will benefit from knowing how he or she is perceived, nothing is gained from doing that from a position of implied superiority.

So what does it mean to deal with our own greater faults first? Jesus seems to be saying that if we do that, then we will be in a position to be actually of help to someone. As God's people, we are called not just to help but also to model the help that God offers to sinners. Remember, in Saint Luke's Gospel folks follow Jesus not because he first called them, but because he reveals God's power in the sight of which those who see it feel sinful or broken, in touch with their incompleteness – but instantly, immediately, they are uplifted and follow. In other words, sin is not something

clung to or dwelt upon – we pass through it to something more – freedom and peace and forgiveness.

Perhaps as we begin Lent this coming Ash Wednesday we can take an honest look at our sinfulness, our brokenness – not that all will be corrected, but that it will be looked at and not dwelt upon but passed through, swallowed up in the victory that is Jesus Christ.

In this way our very brokenness becomes the tool out of which we can help others in a similar position. God offers us Jesus, one who “knew no sin,” but not from a position of superiority, coming instead into our world as a human being. As sinners, we retain our defensiveness and need to prove ourselves right, but, quick as a wink, as recipients of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we know our sins have been forgiven even though we could not prove ourselves right. In that instant we become God’s chosen vehicles to offer that forgiveness to others.

To the extent that I live out of that eternal reality, that sense of forgiveness, not dwelling upon my brokenness but acknowledging it honestly, I am empowered to be of real help to others. It’s a tricky business because it is so easy to slide into a state of superiority/inferiority, especially if the object of our help does not realize his or her good fortune and resists. It is at that point that Jesus’ words in this gospel reading may echo in our heads, urging us to recognize our own sinfulness.

Our Eucharistic prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving – a prayer of rejoicing in the salvation given us in Jesus Christ – making present again the saving deeds that we now share with the world we touch. As Lent begins, it’s a great opportunity to look honestly at ourselves and

not get stuck there but to welcome and receive God’s forgiveness and love which is as abundant as the holy food and drink – the same for all without exception.

There was a story told in a denominational magazine some years ago about a child who attended church with her mother on a Sunday when the pastor was preaching against defiling the “Temple of the Holy Spirit” with “bad health practices” such as smoking. After church the child and her mother got into the car and drove off. Within a block the mother saw another member of the congregation lighting up a cigarette on the way home. “Look at that,” the mother said, “not a block from the church an smoking already!” “Look at that,” said the child, “not a block from the church and judging already.”

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