

Called to Self-denial and Service

Called to self-denial and service is the theme we are invited to reflect on today. Self-denial is the exercise of literally putting God first in our lives. It is acknowledging that God is the source of all that exists, including all human beings. Service is the work human being undertake as testimony of the fact that we exist for the sake of the God who called us into being and gives us our identity. Service is the means whereby human beings generally, and people of faith in particular, gives expression to the faith that was handed unto us and which we have made our own.

Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, invites us to contemplate the call to self-denial and service against the background of righteousness as described by Jesus in the Gospel reading for today. In St. Matthew 6:1 Jesus warns his disciples not to practice self-denial and service as an outward show but purely on the basis of the reward they will receive from God. Living a life of righteousness is the way Jesus presents the message to the disciples and Alice McKenzie is of the view living the life of righteous is consistent with practicing inner piety as well as being advocates for justice. McKenzie does not see a contradiction between piety and advocacy for justice. In fact she sees the two as complimenting each other.

Professor McKenzie illustrates the practice of piety and justice through the use of a story concerning her brother and his daughter. Her brother instructed his eight

year old daughter to go and clean her room. In less than fifteen minutes she reported she was finished and wanted to go back to watching television. The child's father went to inspect the room as he could not believe she finished so quickly. Low and behold, when he entered the room it was in fact quite in order, however, a thought struck him that he should look in the clothes closet. Upon opening the door a mountain of debris in the form of clothes, shoes and toys almost pushed him to the floor. He took a chair and sat in the middle of the room, called his daughter and waited until she painstakingly cleaned the room. Only then was she allowed to return to watching television.

Called to Self-Denial

For McKenzie, the exchange between her brother and her niece is an example of the call to self-denial or the practice righteous. Self-denial is expressed in Matthew's Gospel as the practice of prayer and fasting. Though these are not exclusively individual practices, as whole communities are sometimes known to gather for prayer and fasting, nevertheless, prayer and fasting are disciplines designed to strengthen the interior life of the person of faith. Prayer is the commitment on the part of the person of faith to keep the communication channel open between the individual and God. The prayer channel is open for the sake of the individual as well as the community. On the individual level prayer takes the form of petition, praise and thanksgiving as the individual brings her or his concerns to God. Prayer is communal, on the other hand, in that it focuses on the needs of others and the world. Prayer in this sense is often described as intercessory in that the concerns of, and for others take centre stage. Concern for the integrity of the child led McKenzie's brother to follow up on his daughter's

pronouncement as failure to do so would mean she can twist the truth in order to satisfy immediate gratification.

Another important lesson to be learnt from the child's father, concerning personal righteousness, is the importance of sitting there while she cleans the room. McKenzie points out that such is the picture she has in mind of God accompanying each person as she or he painstakingly cleans the interior world of the heart. She invites us to use the five weeks of Lent to imagine God sitting at the centre of our lives watching as we work at cleaning out the emotional and spiritual closet. Like a loving parent, God sits with us, as Job's friends sat with him, patiently waiting for the response, similar to that which Jesus gave at the end of his life – "it is finished." But then we must ask what does finish mean in relation to the call to self-denial or the practice of righteousness?

Finish, in relation to cleaning a child's room, does not mean there will be no other opportunity to clean the room. Finish means the existing clutter has been cleared to make way for clutter that will arise later in the day, and the next day, and the next day etc. Similarly, completing the task of self-denial, following the five weeks of Lent, prepares us to renew our baptismal commitment at Easter. At the Easter Vigil service, and twice on Easter Day, we will be invited to renew our baptismal commitment. Cleaning the clutter in our hearts prepares us to say on Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Lord's passion, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Finish is therefore spoken of as completing one task in anticipation of being assigned other tasks. Taken in relation to Lent, finishing a task means positioning ourselves or preparing for the

celebration of Easter, knowing when we have completed the celebration, we will need to revisit the cleaning exercise all over again. In fact, outside of Lent, we are invited to do house or heart cleaning each time we confess our sins. So, silence during the prayer of confession, for example, is another opportunity to clean the clutter in our hearts and carry on the process of self-denial or the practice of righteousness.

Service as a Practice of Righteousness

St. Francis of Assisi is reputed to have said to his new recruits, while preparing to send them out, “preach the word, and if necessary, use words.” Francis sought to emphasize that the Gospel is more about what we do than about what we say. Using his life as an example, Francis saw it fit to focus the attention of the new recruits on the value of engaging life in the world of people in situations and places where it matters most. Could it be that Pope Benedict the XVI retired because he recognized he could no longer preach the Gospel in action that would serve as an example to the faithful? Faced with a Church that is undergoing dramatic decline, especially in Europe where he said he would be focusing much of his work, could it be the Pope is mindful that service is central to the proclamation of the Gospel? Could his retirement be based on the fact that he is incapable of leading by example and therefore he felt it is important to step aside?

McKenzie says inward piety, which includes a life of prayer and fasting, should result in outward acts of almsgiving or advocacy for justice. Writing to a mixture

of Jews and Gentiles, Matthew reminds the Church community, using words of Jesus, that reaching out to the neighbour is central to Christian piety. Works of charity, as such activity is usually described, means caring for the homeless, the infirmed, those living with HIV and AIDS, the disabled, the hearing impaired, those with impaired sight, those living with dementia, those who are in nursing homes and countless others who need to hear the Gospel not in words only but also in deeds of compassion and love.

Service as a practice of righteousness is what some students have in mind this morning following the worship service. It is their intention to travel to the Open Arms Drop in Centre to fulfill what we will say at the end of the service, "Go in peace and serve the Lord." To this end, they have decided to demonstrate the reality of the life of ashes by living out the message of the prayer attributed to St. Francis that, "it is in giving that we receive, and, it is pardoning that we are pardoned." Central to Christian service as a practice of righteousness means making real the justice we receive following house or heart cleaning and hearing God's words of "well done" to us. Feeling energized and affirmed by such words of commendation we are invited to commit ourselves to make justice a reality for all people.

Lent as a call to self-denial and service is the message we are invited to embrace today and for the next five weeks. Among other things I invite you to establish methods of heart cleaning that are doable. Take time to match self-denial in prayer and fasting with acts of justice and compassion for others. In doing so I invite you to take with you the words of one song writer:

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord

Abide in him always and feed on his word

Make friends of God's children, help those who are weak

Forgetting in nothing, his blessing to seek

May God help us to observe the season of Lent through acts of self-denial and service. In so doing we will fulfill all righteousness. In the name...