

Commentary to the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time: Liberating Law



Brother Alpheus said, "Food Cold."

"OK," Brother Alpheus," the Abbot said, "You may no longer speak until five more years when you will be allowed to say your next two words."

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In the first reading for this week, Ezra reads from the Law of God. The occasion is some time after the Dedication of the rebuilt Temple, after the exile. Let's just place it about 510 BC. Ezra presents the Law of God on a major feast day, perhaps the New Year, perhaps what later generations would call Yom Kippur. One thing caught my eye in that first reading from the history book, Nehemiah. Ezra continually tells the people not to be sad, but instead be full of joy. The Law of God results in joy, not sadness.

These two readings assert that the Law of God, The Word of God should be received in joy not in gloom. The Law of God is seen as liberating, not something that is restrictive.

Let us be honest now. This is not how most of us view commandments, Church teachings, etc. But if we really think about it, we can understand the joy and the freedom we have received when we have adhered to the principles of our faith life, our morality.

Many people in our times have demanded a freedom from all codes of moral conduct. How happy are these people? Can a person be a member of a family he or she loves and receive love from that family if that person flaunts the basic code for living in the family? A person cannot be happily married and at the same time unfaithful. A person cannot grow in love and be basically selfish. If a lack of rules brought happiness, than why do so many hedonists commit suicide? If a code of morality is supposed to be somber and oppressive, than why are the happiest people in the world those whose lives revolve around a very strict following of the Lord? Some of the happiest people I have ever met are the Trappist monks I made retreats with in Conyers, Georgia and in Gethsemani, Kentucky. They have to get up in the middle of the night. They have set hours for work and prayer. Their diets are restricted. They take vows of silence. Yet, they are happy. These are not people who do not know any better. They are some of the brightest people of our generation. Nor are they social misfits, people who could have no place in society. The monastery will only accept people who have been successful members of society. They are people whose lives point us to the true source of happiness. Honestly, I have never met Brother Alpheus in a Trappist monastery. The monks are happy. The Law of God has brought joy.

Think of the dark corridors of our society, the sleazy sections of the cities with their sex clubs and free life style. Think about the people who flaunt all codes of behavior. Are any of them happy. Are

prostitutes happy? Only in the movies. Are their customers happy? No, they are depressed and depressing. Are those who party to the extreme and wake up wondering who they are happy? Or do some of them finally realize that their way of life destroys all meaning in life?

Consider some people you have known in your life who have demonstrated contempt for all codes of behavior. I guarantee you that in their unending quest for happiness, they were among the saddest people in the world.

One day I had a particularly beautiful experience that demonstrated the joy that following God's way brings. I was scurrying about the front office when I noticed a teenage girl standing behind some people getting Mass cards. She looked pretty shy. She also looked pretty pregnant. I said to her, "Can I help you, honey?" (OK, so I'm not politically correct.) She told me that she was wondering if this is the Church where she could get some food. I walked her outside and asked her if she was pregnant. She said, "Six months," with a big smile and then told me, "That's why I need food, I'm eating everything in sight." I brought her over to the Community Life Ministry where our wonderful volunteers took good care of her with the food you folks bring in. I also brought her to our Pregnancy Center. I asked her if she had everything she needed for the baby. She said she had nothing. So I told her that the people of St. Ignatius have help for her and her baby. She got in touch with one of our counselors and was able to get all sorts of baby furniture, and clothes, and infant toys and general stuff. Before she left she said to me, "You know, I could have had an abortion like some of my girl friends. But I know it is not right. I know there is a baby in me, and I just couldn't live with myself." I'm relating all this to you because I want to emphasize this point: It is not guilt that kept her from having an abortion; it was the joy that she would be doing the right thing by having the baby.

The law of the Lord brings joy. On Tuesday we considered the grim anniversary of Roe vs Wade. The advocates of abortion love to portray the Catholic Church as being oppressive in its determination to protect life. To this I must tell

you something that I am certain you would agree with: I have met many people who, no matter what their situations in life, have rejoiced in their unexpected babies. I have never met anyone who could look back on an abortion with joy. Our Upper Pinellas Pregnancy Center really protects and respects two lives, the baby's and the mother's.

So often we Catholics are portrayed as people struggling to live under oppressive laws. That's not true. People who chose the way of the Lord are happy. That way demands that we take control of ourselves, and allow His Love to motivate our lives. The big lie of our society is that happiness can be

found outside of the Lord. We know that what others pass off as happiness is merely a temporary band aid over a broken life.

Happiness, comes from God and leads us back to God.

These reflections have led me, and perhaps also you, to a deeper understanding of a passage in Psalm 19:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;

the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;

the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino