

NUGGETS OF WISDOM

(Msgr. McHenry was not scheduled to preach this Sunday.

This is a Lenten homily preached a few years back.)

What are some of the nuggets of wisdom that you have gleaned from your experiences through life? We all are capable of saying things like “We will NEVER do that again.” This is usually prompted by an experience turned bad. As we realize what happened we make decisions concerning future behavior. I remember hearing the following bit of wisdom given to me as a young priest. I had never heard it before and it gave me pause for thought. The person who spoke to me was an older and wiser priest. He said simply, “Be careful who you hate for you become who you hate.” Not fully grasping the truth of that statement at the time I have come to verify its truth claim personally. I have seen sons who hated their fathers become their fathers. I have seen daughters who hated their mothers turn into their mothers. And then what? Does the hate make either of them any better? Any happier? More secure? More at peace?

Another little nugget of wisdom that is probably more familiar to you serves as a corollary to the above. “Hate the sin, not the sinner.” We may hate what a particular person is doing—to others or to themselves but we are not to hate them. This is hard to do because as human beings we know that our actions flow from our hearts. If the deed is a hurtful, hateful deed then it comes from a heart that desires to hurt and hate. This prompts us to want to hurt and hate in return. But Jesus bids us respond another way. Hate what they do; love them.

I have seen hate destroy people, sometimes the one hated but always the one hating, in whose heart the hatred lives. I have seen jealousy and resentment tear people up, tormenting them. I have seen jealousy destroy a person’s ability to form deep, lasting relationships because there is not capacity for trust.

I have seen lust destroy people, sometimes the one lusted after or abused. But the one in whose heart the lust lives grows distorted, less able to relate in an authentic and intimate way. I have seen greed and arrogance destroy people, sometimes the object of the greed. And sometimes it takes a long time but the arrogance and greed will destroy the heart of the person in whom they live. I have seen these things. You have too. How do we stop this destruction? How do we turn it around?

These are the questions we need to have in mind when we return to what Jesus says in the gospel. “Love your enemies.” Love each person, the

good, the indifferent and the bad. Love everybody, even those who do not love you. Don't think that you always have to respond in kind, or even save face. Because you don't. Yes. There are takers in life and sometimes they will take from you, or take advantage of you or use you. So what? For a time they may look like they have won but they have not won. They have lost. Learn how to be magnanimous. David did, with Saul. Saul was trying to kill him. David had the chance to be rid of Saul but he did not choose to respond in kind. He was truly magnanimous. Saul eventually is killed in a battle. David becomes the king of Israel for forty years in his place.

Jesus is magnanimous as he hangs upon the cross. "Father, forgive them (us) for they know not what they do." In your heart of hearts, ask yourself if you are incapable of such forgiveness. You are very capable, not on your own power but because the Holy Spirit of Christ lives in you. What the Spirit enabled Jesus to do on the cross the Spirit will enable us to do when our crosses come. We are capable of such forgiveness. But we must consciously choose it.

These teachings of Jesus always sound so impractical, foolish even. We just know that they won't work in the marketplace or in the community or in our homes. Jesus knows that his values and his way are not yet the way of the world. That is why he has come so that his way will become the way in the world. Jesus knows the Quid pro quo, "pay to play" approach to things. Jesus knows about the proactive, "I will do to you before you get a chance to do unto me." His way is the way of life in the kingdom. Do unto others as you would have them or want them to do unto you. Take that initiative.

This is not foolishness. It is kingdom life. It is God's way. That is how God has treated you. That is God's attitude. That is the way that God measures things. God is always God of the loving heart even when we do hateful things to him or hate him. Wednesday we began the season of Lent. We all have our little penances that we trot out each year. But recently I came across a little statement that touched me. It said very simply: "It is a better thing to lose hate this Lent than to lose weight." Better to lose hate than weight. I like it. I think it is a noble effort for a Lenten activity. We each need to work on this not hating another—and surely not ever hating ourselves. For the measure we measure with will indeed be measured back to us.