

## ARE SINS OF OMISSION REAL

Jesus was a storyteller. We call his stories parables. And we know them all pretty much. They often have a point about how we are to get along with each other in life or how God is at work in our world. Today's parable addressed to the Pharisees is a little different. This parable is about the Day of Judgment but in story form and actually about the aftermath of the Day of Judgment and how it has turned out in a couple of cases.

What intrigues me is that the rich man does not seem to be taken to task for mistreating his workers, or gouging fellow businessmen in commerce. The point seems to be that he ends up in a place of torment while the poor guy who had nothing to eat ends up reclining on the bosom of Abraham, a very privileged place of honor. He is in torment not so much for what he did but for what he did not do. Sins of Omission. As Catholics we are much more familiar and more willing to confess sins of commission. But even in the "I confess..." prayer at the beginning of Mass we pray for forgiveness for what I have done and for what I have failed to do. Sins of Omission.

Two stories. One is from almost forty years ago in my life. Winter of 1983. I am a teacher at Cardinal Dougherty High School. I am assigned to reside at Visitation BVM parish at "B" Street and Lehigh Avenue in Kensington. It was then and is today a tough part of the city. I was returning to the Rectory late one school night after a Parents' Meeting. It was about 10:30. I was tired. Long day. And cold. It was frigid. As I pulled into the Parking area by the Church, I noticed there was some movement on the upper church steps. I parked my car and went up the steps. There on the top step was a woman wrapped in a whole series of layers of clothing and newspapers. She was lying on her side. I tried to tell her that she would freeze to death. I tried to get her to move.

I tried for fifteen minutes but she was adamant and she did not want me to touch her or move her. She resisted rather fiercely. Finally, I went down to my car and got a blanket from the trunk and put it over her. Then I went into the Rectory. It never occurred to me to call the police and tell them there was a homeless lady on the steps of the church. I don't know why it didn't. But then I got ready for bed and climbed into a warm bed as she lay on the cold stone steps of the church, One of the worst things I have ever done in my life. And as you can tell it is still part of me.

In the morning as I went to my car the blanket was on the trunk and she was gone. She had made it through the night. No thanks to me. It was a sin of omission. Yes, I did try to cover her but I fundamentally let her down as one human being to another. It was what I did not do for her that left its mark on me. I did not really care. It showed. The point of the parable is that sins of omission are real. And they can cost us dearly for choosing not to see as the Lord sees, and not to act toward a brother or sister in need as the Lord acts.

Second story. My niece has three daughters. One is off to college, one a senior in high school and one a freshman. The senior is applying to various colleges. There is a basic letter about yourself that is to be included with each application. My niece shared her daughter's letter with me. When she was a sophomore right in the middle of the pandemic she was struggling with an eating disorder. Her weight dropped into a place that put her at risk. Her parents were concerned. Her sisters were worried. Others noticed and voiced their concern. My niece was able to get her daughter in the program at CHOP. It is very good and the staff knew exactly how to proceed. First, it was to drastically

increase her daily calorie count and her intake of protein. They would not even start psychological counselling until after the weight had been regained and enough protein restored to the brain cells for the mind to be able to function properly.

It took many weeks but there was good success. My great niece was reluctant and resistant at times. She cried, she got angry. Slowly she made progress. She lost many months and then a whole summer and her beach time. She who was a swimmer and diver hated her bathing suit and how she thought she appeared in it. This whole eating disorder became the subject matter for her letter to the various colleges. It took a lot of courage. But she told the story in detail. Now, she is back to diving and looks like she will be attending a local college and diving for their team. The story she retold had focused on her bathing suit. A symbol of what was and then of her debacle and tears. Then of her triumph once again. She ended the story by citing how she now is proud to wear her bathing suit, a sign of transformation and bravery and triumph. It suits her, she said.

I go into this because suppose her parents had said to her: "Listen, honey, we would like you to eat more because you need protein, and you are not by any means overweight but very underweight. However, we know that you don't really feel like eating so we are going to let you decide for yourself. And we will support you whatever you decide? NO! That cannot be. That would be child abuse. That would be the gravest sin of omission with their daughter's life literally on the line. No! They had to challenge her. They had to find a way to address her thinking and the way she was feeling. They had to help her get help and develop the right narrative that would lead her out of a terrible dilemma. She was too young to know what she wanted to do. At 23 that is a different story but at fourteen or fifteen, the parents had to step up. Not to have helped would have been the gravest sin of omission.

But there are other issues our young face and some parents, in an effort to affirm their child, take the tack of agreeing with what the child is choosing when that is the very opposite of what they should be doing. My friends, our culture has its own share of sins of omission. Not standing up to their children when they need to do so is to abdicate responsibility as parent. They may be okay but their child is not. Do what needs to be done. Get help from those who know what they are doing and who have a proven track record of success. Do not abandon your child to the culture winds that blow this way today and the opposite direction tomorrow.

Today's parable speaks to what happens when you pretend to care or don't really care if you care and what happens to you in the need. This parable is told by Jesus himself who came forth from the heart of the living God. Do not miss the opportunities. Do not think that things do not matter. They do. And the Lord sees the opportunities and reckons what we do and how we respond. Let us pray for the grace to recognize the challenges and to respond always in the best way we can so that none be lost. Including ourselves.