

A bride came down the aisle and when she reached the altar, the groom was standing there with his golf bag and clubs at his side. She said, "What are your golf clubs doing here?" He looked her right in the eye and said, "This isn't going to take all day, is it?"

There is a deep connection between the first reading from Deuteronomy and the gospel. I'm going to give a little background on Deuteronomy, which will set us up for a fuller understanding of the gospel and its command to love God and neighbor.

There are 5 verbs, used for 5 commands, from Moses in this text. Fear, keep, be careful to observe, love, and take to heart these words. A few comments on each.

Fear is not being afraid of God, like a slave afraid of his master. This is the fear of a loving and loyal child, the fear of disappointing their beloved father. This attitude is the psychological origin and essence of all religion. We wish to do what God wants, which gives us the heart of all authentic religion: 'thy will be done.'

Keep, or more fully, 'Thy will be done,' is obedience. Faith is not merely an opinion; faith is not only belief – faith is faithfulness in our actions. The 11th chapter of Hebrews is a roll call of the great men and women of faith – and they are commended for their obedience, for what their faith DID.

This obedience is to be done carefully, with compassion, attention, and love. Being careful to observe means we are careful with it because we realize that following God's will is a matter of life or death – it's about eternity. We take this all seriously.

The central commandment, of course, is to love the Lord with heart and soul, which means we put God absolutely first, not merely adding Him to our life as the icing on the cake but to let Him be the whole cake, the Lord of our whole life. We don't put shopping, or money, or stuff, or prestige in front of God.

And finally, we are to 'take to heart these words.' The Hebrew literally says, 'These words shall be upon your heart,' or 'in your heart.' Because we love GOD with our heart, we love these WORDS with all our heart. We may not love God with all our heart, but we can at least WANT to love God with all our heart, and if we do, God will gradually turn our heart into what we want it to be. (adapted from Peter Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, Cycle B, p. 753-755)

All of which sets us up for the gospel where Jesus connects love of God with love of neighbor, which is how we make this concrete, something we DO, not merely believe. It's the difference between justice and charity. Charity is giving away some of our time, energy, resources, and person, in order to help others in need. And that's an admirable virtue, the sign of a good heart. Justice, on the other hand, is less about directly giving something away than it is about looking to change the conditions and systems that put others in need. No doubt, we're all familiar with the little parable used to illustrate this difference. In brief, it goes like this: a town situated on the edge of a river finds itself confronted every day by a number of bodies floating downstream in the river. The townsfolk tend to the bodies, minister to those who are alive and respectfully bury the dead. They do this for years, with good hearts; but, through all those years, none of them ever journey up the river to find out why there are wounded and dead bodies floating in the river each day. The townsfolk are good-hearted and charitable, but that in itself is not going to change the situation that's bringing them wounded and dead bodies every day. In addition, the charitable townsfolk aren't even remotely aware that their manner of life, seemingly completely unconnected to the wounded and dead bodies they're daily

attending to, might in fact be contributing to the cause of those lost lives and dreams and that, good-hearted as they are, they may be complicit in something that's harming others, even while it's affording them the resources and wherewithal to be charitable.

The lesson here is not that we shouldn't be charitable and good-hearted. One-to-one charity, as the parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear, is what's demanded of us, both as humans and as Christians. The lesson is that being good-hearted alone is not enough. It's just the first part of the great commandment of Jesus – to love God. It's a start, a good start, but more is asked of us, love of neighbor. And that requires something more than just simple generosity. I suspect most of us already know this, but perhaps we're less conscious of something less obvious, namely, that our very generosity itself might be contributing to a blindness that lets us support – and vote for – the exact political, economic, and cultural systems which are to blame for the wounded and dead bodies we're attending to in our charity.

That our own good works of charity can help blind us to our complicity in injustice is something highlighted in a book by Anand Giridharada, *WINNERS TAKE ALL: THE ELITE CHARADE OF CHANGING THE WORLD*. In a rather unsettling assertion, Giridharada submits that *generosity can be, and often is, a substitute for, and a means of avoiding, the necessity of a more just and equitable system and fairer distribution of power*. Charity, wonderful as it is, is not yet justice; a good heart, wonderful as it is, is not yet good policy that serves the less-privileged; and philanthropy, wonderful as it is, can have us confuse the charity we're doing with the justice that's asked of us, and demanded by the gospel. For this reason among others, Giridharada submits that public problems should not be privatized and relegated to the domain of private charity, such as the church, as is now so often the case.

Christiana Zenner, reviewing his book in the Jesuit publication *AMERICA*, sums this up by saying: "Beware of the temptation to idealize a market or an individual who promises salvation without attending to the least among us and without addressing the conditions that facilitated the domination in the first place." Then she adds: "When we see the direct violation of another person, a direct injustice, we're taken aback, but the unfairness and the perpetrator are obvious. We see that something is wrong and we can see who is to blame. But, and this is her real point, when we live with unjust systems that violate others we can be blind to our own complicity because we can feel good about ourselves because our charity is helping those who have been violated.

For example, imagine I'm a good-hearted person who feels a genuine sympathy for the homeless in my city. As the Christmas season approaches, I make a large donation of food and money to the local food bank. Further still, on Christmas day itself, before I sit down to eat my own Christmas dinner, I spend several hours helping serve a Christmas meal to the homeless. My charity is admirable, and I cannot help but feel good about what I just did. And what I did was a good thing! But then, when I support a politician or a policy that privileges the rich and is unfair to the poor, I can more easily rationalize that I'm doing my just part and that I have a heart for the poor, even as my vote itself helps ensure that there will always be homeless people to feed on Christmas day.

Few virtues are as important as charity. It's the sign of a good heart. But the deserved good feeling we get when we give of ourselves in charity shouldn't be confused with the false feeling that we're really doing our part to make a more just world. Love of God must be matched with love of neighbor and that's not just a feeling. It's something we do. Charity requires justice as well. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, *JUSTICE AND CHARITY, REVISITED*, posting of 9 December 2019)