

Pennsylvania and Wisdom

Remember the movie *Serpico*? It came out in the early 1970s. About a New York City cop who took on the department's deeply rooted corruption and coverups. Al Pacino played the lead role. The movie contained countless hair-raising, heart-stopping depictions of imminent disaster.

I saw it with a batch of high school friends, including a guy we can think of as "Kwazzi." Kwazzi could not handle the cliff-hangers. He would look away from the screen, put his hands over his eyes and ask "What's happening." He, as Jack Nicholson might say "Couldn't handle the truth." And because he couldn't take it all in, he couldn't figure out the unfolding solution.

As your pastor, I encourage you to stay above Kwazzi's error, to see as much as you can, including the scariest stuff. I encourage you to take in all the truth you can about the recently described Pennsylvania horrors and about the much larger picture. I urge you to push yourself the extra mile in trying to do four things: listen to the victims' stories, think and speak in accurate terms, recall our church's darker hours, and listen profoundly to today's readings.

The victims' stories deserve as much attention as we can manage. Reports about the numbers shock us. They also expose us to the risk of overlooking the individual stories. And it is the stories that matter most. They are stories of mutilation. They are not stories of people who have endured spiritual and psychological bee-bites that hurt for a bit and then go away. They are stories of life-altering injuries, the spiritual and emotional equivalents of wolf attacks. If we could picture the 1000+ victims as heavily bandaged we would be doing ourselves a favor.

My own conversations with abuse victims convinces me that isolation is among their most agonizing wounds. It so often begins with a misguided but understandable sense of culpability. "I was 12 years old and I should have known better." That mistaken self-blame blame too easily morphs into self-loathing, feelings of unworthiness, suspicions that "if they knew the real me they would not accept me," and finally to self-imposed emotional and spiritual seclusion. To be spiritually and emotionally mauled is to incur countless wounds but, to me, the isolation is the worst. Amid the mind-boggling reports of numbers of bishops, priests and victims, the lifelong consequences of the attacks can get overlooked. Listen to the stories.

The language in which we think and speak of the tragedies shapes our reflection and our reactions. Our language about sin and crime is particularly important. Many sins are crimes and many crimes are sins – but not all crimes are sins and not all sins are crimes. Sin calls for repentance and conversion. Crime calls for the administration of justice. Each of us is a sinner in need of repentance and conversion. Few if any of us here today have committed the sin of spiritually and emotionally maiming a child. Few if any of us have ever committed a crime of any sort.

With a few exceptions, the people named in the Pennsylvania report have committed grave sin and hideous crime. They have spiritually and emotionally crippled children and vulnerable adults. The same is true of those who abetted them. Their sins call for repentance. Their crimes call for justice. As we listen to the stories, we might find a few that entail "misdeeds," or "poor judgement" or "misguided passions." Most entail the grave sin and the grave crime of crippling another. Accurate language helps us think clearly and respond in inspired ways.

The big picture of church history also deserves our consideration. That picture regrettably reveals that this bottom-of-the-barrel moment is not our first. Each of us could page through church history and find chapters that horrify us. Some might focus on the Inquisition. Others might mention the church's role in the New World's forced conversions. We also have reason to feel sad

and angry about the trials of Wycliffe and Galileo, the Crusades, clerical participation in slavery and the 16th century executions of thousands of women convicted of being witches. My personal sadness reaches a nadir when I consider the fallout from the vicious papacies of the late 1400s and early 1500s. The self-indulgence was mind-boggling.

Recalling earlier bottom-of-the-barrel moments, it is equally important to recall God's fidelity. Just as God raised up holy kings in ancient Israel who combatted their ancestors' horrible sins, God continually rescues the church from its self-destructive ways. In every generation, God sends wise women and men who abet God's effort to lift us up to the peace and the dignity God desires for us. Corruption, sin and crime are never the last word. Through the efforts of women and men who say "yes" to God's offer of wisdom and who use that gift well, we find our way back toward the light. God continues to offer that wisdom and God will always do that.

Today's readings make that point powerfully. The scriptures remind us that God always has and always will offer the grace of wisdom to people who will use it well. While I initially wished that today's gospel would depict Jesus cleansing the temple in a state of fury, or maybe weeping over Jerusalem and its lousy choices, I am very grateful that today's readings focus on wisdom. Wisdom is the front story in today's scriptures. The abject rejection of wisdom is a major backstory in the Pennsylvania reports. The call to use wisdom sends us forth today. They deserve a good listen.

Wisdom is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many regard wisdom as the greatest of the seven. St. Bernard taught us that wisdom works as hard on the heart as it does on the mind. My take on the tradition is that wisdom is the gift from God that enables us to make inspired choices in the heat of any battle. Inspired choices are those that help the world to become, in huge ways or minute, more like God wants it to be. And how does God want the world to be? A place in which all persons love God with their whole being and in which each person loves others as much as each loves one's self. Hence, when we use the gift of wisdom, we make the choices that help others to experience God's love, to love God, to experience human love, and to love other people. Wisdom is one powerful gift. Today's readings remind us that God always wants to give us wisdom. God is constantly cheering us on, offering us wisdom and encouraging us to use wisdom well.

Today's first reading comes from the ninth chapter of Proverbs, a book that is like a giant collection of fortune cookie fortunes. People took wise sayings of their day and, over the course of several centuries, put them into one big book, a book that was probably compiled after the Exile. Proverbs' ninth chapter, the one from which we hear today, is something of a highpoint. The depiction of Wisdom as a gracious hostess was great news to the people of the day. The news that Lady Wisdom is inviting all people into her perfect, seven-columned home – even those who "are simple and lack understanding" – was a great relief. True wisdom has nothing to do with one's station or training. It is a gift from God that God offers to all people in all ages. That offer is unrelenting and unswerving and is often most conspicuous and persuasive in our darkest hours.

In today's passage from Ephesians, the letter's author contrasts wisdom and debauchery. Wisdom prompts us to make inspired choices that renew the face of the earth according to God's hopes. The lack of wisdom leads us to behaviors that have nothing to do with God's hopes. Debauchery, the sin of excessive self-indulgence stands prominently among those sins that have nothing to do with God's hopes. One might argue persuasively that the sins and crimes committed in Pennsylvania, both the direct attacks and the cover ups, were debaucheries that emerged from an overt rejection of wisdom. The second reading also asks us to "understand what is the will of the

Lord.” The scripture would not ask us to do that if doing so were impossible. To apprehend God’s hopes, we need wisdom. Hence the invitation to know God’s will implies a never-ending offer of wisdom. And because God’s offer of wisdom is never-ending, we have reason to hope we will prevent these horrifying sins and crimes from recurring. Because of wisdom, hope makes sense.

Today’s Gospel also describes God’s offer of wisdom. This passage from the closing verses of John’s sixth chapter, the Bread of Life chapter, contains several invitations to deeper relationship with Jesus. We can hear it in two ways. We can hear it as all Christians do, as an invitation to organize our lives around Jesus. We can also hear it in a particularly Catholic way, as an invitation to deeper relationship with Christ through the Eucharist, His body and blood. The passage has four phrases that begin with “Whoever eats.” Each of those phrases conveys an invitation to people in every age to move more deeply into relationship with Jesus. Wisdom alone prompts us to accept that invitation. As the invitation lasts forever, so does the offer of wisdom.

Wisdom – the God-given gift that enables us to make inspired choices in the heat of all battles – offers to prevent recurrences of this calamity. The victims’ stories convince us of this disaster’s depths. Accurate language and reflection enable us to see it for what it is. A good look at church history reminds us that we have been to the bottom-of-the-barrel before. That same view of history offers the reassuring news that God continually rescues us by making great use of people who accept and use the wisdom God offers. The readings remind us that God’s offer of wisdom is eternal. It is part of who God is. We have no reason to fear that the offer will end. We can hope.

And where might a desire for wisdom take us? First, it can take us to the spiritual mirror, to candid self-assessment of our reactions to this debacle. Perhaps we can scan our reactions and wonder about their wisdom content. We can wonder if our reactions are wise, if they help others to experience God’s love, to love God, to feel human love, and to love others. Some of us will have volcanic reactions. That response is fine as long as it is wise, as long as it prompts us to make choices and undertake actions that advance Christ’s cause. Some of us will react quietly. That reaction is also fine, as long as it gets us to make choices that advance Christ’s cause. Are you seeing wisdom in your reactions? I bet that if you look carefully enough, you will see plenty of wisdom and a few opportunities to receive more wisdom and make better use of it.

Second, the desire for wisdom can take us into conversations with others. It can invite us to assess our reactions to other peoples’ reactions. Do our responses to others reflect wisdom? Are we being with others in ways that help them to feel God’s love, to love God, to feel human love, and to love others. Can we be patient with those who see things our way and those who do not? Can we let wisdom lead us?

Finally, what matters to me, your pastor, is your relationship with Jesus Christ. This calamity can make us question that relationship. Precisely in this difficult moment, I want to remind you of so many truths you already know. Jesus is weeping. He loves every one of the victims more than any human could. Their injuries crush Him. Your sadness saddens him greatly. Your anger makes good sense to Him. Jesus loves your concern for the victims and He knows that you can make great use of the wisdom he offers – as priests who pray for the victims’ healing, for the perpetrators’ repentance and for the pursuit of justice – as prophets who can console all who grieve this atrocity and who can challenge the church to prevent future recurrences of this disaster – and as kings who build up the community, who help to repair the damage this tragedy inflicts on the community.

It is a privilege to be your pastor, to be with you as you take in the painful truth, as you say “yes” to wisdom, and as you fight the good fight of faith. May Christ’s peace regain its place in the hearts of all the victims and in the hearts of all who care about them.