

Sunday, August 7, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

Values

Sometimes I think about myself, who I really am and what are the values that guide my life. This may seem a waste of time but I am convinced that, without such reflection, it is difficult to maintain a sense of personal integrity and decency. Ideals are easily compromised by the vicissitudes of life and our own individual choices. It is important, then, to periodically check whether our attitudes and actions correspond to our values.

Values are different than rules which, of course, never can determine true goodness. Values signify soul, a capacity for compassion, humaneness, and generosity. As a Catholic priest, my values are derived from Jesus who counseled concern for others, especially those most indeed, as the only necessary ethic. There is, according to the Gospels, no other standard which can justify an individual or measure the character of his life. Still, some people prefer rules because they are clear, but Jesus offered value-centered approaches which promote responsibility rather than obedience, and suggested three comprehensive criteria: the Sermon on the Mount - beginning with the Beatitudes, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats or Last Judgment, and the Golden Rule, all of which are found in the Gospel of St Matthew. A consistent practice of even one of these will guarantee a life of genuine goodness.

Our personal lives and the state of the world certainly would be improved if we practiced these basic human values enshrined in the Gospels. Imagine if we always chose peace as our first option, rather than anger, retaliation, or violence. "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus assured us, but most people, faith notwithstanding, do not consider peace a realistic strategy. Yet, Jesus reminded us that "those who live by the sword shall die by the sword." War breeds more war, violence more violence. Weapons of any kind are not an effective solution to problems. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus recommended that we "pray for our persecutors and love our enemies" but hostility and hatred appear more popular than prayer, even among Christians and other people of good faith. Many may claim the Bible is important, and even insist on a literal interpretation, but it does not seem to impact the attitudes and decisions of their lives, though that is clearly what Jesus intended. In the Parable of the Last Judgment, Jesus insisted that care of the sick, the poor, and the immigrant, the most pressing issues of our world today, was the sole proof of human goodness. Jesus explicitly told us to treat them as we would treat him, to help them, not to fear them, to embrace them, not ostracize them. We must do this on both a personal and societal level.

The simplest way to ensure goodness is to follow the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you want them to do to you." This is a clear, uncomplicated precept. What we expect from others we do to them. At the least, it means "do no harm". In fact, it presumes that we will do our best for others, treating them with respect, dignity, and generosity, even to the point of some sacrifice. This is an ethic which we all can practice.