

Rolheiser: A threat to our decency

Jesus tells us that in the end we will be judged on how we dealt with the poor in our lives, but there are already dangers now, in this life, in not reaching out to the poor

Here's how Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, teases out that danger: "I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we condemn others."

What needs to be highlighted here is what we do to ourselves when we don't reach out in compassion to the poor. We corrupt our own decency. As Stevenson puts it: An absence of compassion corrupts our decency – as a state, as a church, as family, and as individuals. How so?

St. Augustine teaches that we can never be morally neutral, either we are growing in virtue or falling into vice. We never have the luxury of simply being in some neutral, holding state. There's no moral neutrality. Either we are growing in virtue or sliding into virtue's opposite. That's true for all of life. A thing is either growing or it's regressing.

So too with our attitude towards justice and the poor: Either we are actively reaching out to the poor and being more drawn into concern for them or we are unconsciously hardening our hearts against them and unknowingly sliding into attitudes that trivialize their issues and distance ourselves from them. If we are not actively advocating for justice and the poor, it is inevitable that at a point we will, with completely sincere hearts, downplay the issues of poverty, racism, inequality, and injustice.

It's interesting to note that in the famous text on the final judgment in the Gospel where Jesus describes how God will divide the sheep from the goats on the basis of how they treated the poor, neither group, those who did it correctly and those who didn't, actually knew what they were doing. The group who did it right state that they didn't know that in touching the poor they were touching Christ; and the group who got it wrong protest that had they known that Christ was in the poor, they would have reached out. Jesus assures us that it doesn't matter. Mature discipleship lies simply in the doing, irrespective of our conscious attitude.

And so we need to be alert not just to our conscious attitudes but to what we are actually doing. We can, in all sincerity, in all good conscience, in all good heart, be blind towards justice and the poor. We can be moral men and women, pious church-goers, generous donors to those who ask help from us, warm to our own families and friends, and yet, blind to ourselves, though not to the poor, be unhealthily elitist, subtle racists, callous towards the environment, and protective of our own privilege. We are still good persons no doubt, but the absence of compassion in one area of our lives leaves us limping morally.

We can be good persons and yet fall into a certain hardness of heart because of kindred, ideological circles that falsely affirm us. Within any circle of friends, either we are talking about ways that we can more effectively lessen the gaps between rich and poor or we are talking, however unconsciously, about the need to defend the gaps that presently exist. One kind of conversation is stretching our hearts; the other is narrowing them. Lack of compassion for justice and the poor will inevitably work at turning a generous heart into a defensive one.

We all have friends who admire us and send us signals that we are good, big-hearted, virtuous persons. And no doubt this is substantially true. But the affirmation we receive from our own kind can be a false mirror. A truer mirror is how those who are politically, racially, religiously, and temperamentally different from ourselves assess us. How do the poor feel about us? How do refugees assess our goodness? How do other races rate our compassion?

And what about the mirror that Jesus holds up for us when he tells us that our goodness will be judged by how we treat the poor and that the litmus test of goodness consists in how well we love our enemies?

An absence of compassion in even one area subtly corrupts the decency of a community, a state, a nation, and that eventually turns our generosity into defensiveness.