

Homily – The World is Gray

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I like gardening, and I like pets. They are both a big part of my life, and they are something I have in common with my husband, Jeff. We both like gardening and pets. I also like people who dislike gardening and pets. Sometimes we demonize people who dislike some of our favorite things. They become the other and the other is bad since we are good. All too often we think we are in a dualistic world in which everything, including people, are either good or bad. This is black and white thinking. Instead, Jesus teaches us to think in a non-dualistic way. When we achieve a certain level of maturity and wisdom, we know that most things in this world, and all people in this world, are actually varying shades of gray, varying shades of good and bad. No one is completely good or completely bad. Even when Dcn. Susan spends several minutes at the start of last week's sermon sharing her dislike for gardening and pets, I know she also has some good in her as well.

Many of you know that one of my favorite spiritual guides is Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and Roman Catholic priest who leads an organization called "The Center for Action and Contemplation." And, one of my favorite books by Richard Rohr is called "Falling Upward"

The premise of the book is about human development and more specifically spiritual and identity development. Fr. Richard structures spiritual development into a first half of life and a second half of life. But, don't be fooled. The first half is about a stage of development that is not just about being young.

Yes, in general, the first half of life corresponds with a person's younger years. Conversely, from a spiritual standpoint, the second half of life is when a person is older.

"The task of the first half of life is to create a proper container for one's life and answer the first essential questions: "What makes me significant?" "How can I support myself?" and "Who will go with me?" The task of the second half of life is, quite simply, to find the actual contents that this life container was meant to hold and deliver."

"The two halves are cumulative and sequential, and both are very necessary." You can't achieve the wisdom and values of the second half of life without going through the necessary development of the first half of life.

Now, some people achieve the second half wisdom at an earlier age than others. And sadly, some people never achieve wisdom. I'm guessing that we all know examples of both. Not everyone achieves wisdom at the same pace.

In addition, the wall between the first and second half of life is permeable. By this I mean that there is some wisdom that a person can gain while still in the first stage of life and there is some folly that can still catch a person in the second half of life. It is a curious thing that a foolish person can have some wisdom and a wise person can still have some folly.

Now, I mean to make the wisdom of the second half of life sound attractive to you, but I don't mean to demonize the first half of life. Once again, the first half of life is necessary. It is just that at some point one is to let go of the first half and move into the second half.

The first half of life issues focus on the big three concerns of identity, security, and sexuality.

In the first half of life we figure out who we are, and we figure out what are the gifts and talents that I have that will shape my life's work.

An interesting requirement of the first half of life is that we all need some successes and some positive feedback early in life. We need validations that develop our ego structure. The ego is part of the container that is our identity. Until a person gets their narcissistic fix, they will continue to go overboard in protecting their identity, defending it, proving it, and asserting it. "You have to first have an ego structure to then transcend it and move beyond it."

Next, in the first half of life we achieve safety and security. Yes, this means physical safety, but it also means that we feel safe in being who we are. We can stick up for ourselves. We learn that we are of value.

And finally, in the first half of life we learn how to be intimate with others. This includes emotional intimacy as well as physical intimacy. Being in an intimate relationship with another person actually takes work. Anyone who has been married for more than a short period of time knows that marriage, and any sustained relationship does not happen without effort.

Each of these big three concerns of identify, security and sexuality is important to get right in the first half of life. Again, you can't reach the second stage of development without going through the first stage.

Now there are some different values and goals in the first and second halves of life.

In the first half we assert ourselves. In the second half humility is a primary virtue.

In the first half we are always trying to prove that we are right. In the second half you achieve identify through self-effacement.

In the first half you pretend that you have no weaknesses and faults. In the second half you achieve wisdom through self-awareness and acknowledging your weaknesses.

You achieve wisdom by serving others.

You achieve wisdom by drawing closer to God.

You achieve wisdom by seeing that death is part of life.

For the people of God, for those who are on a spiritual journey, for those that follow Jesus, there is a tension between the first half of life and the second half of life. We are called to be aware of this tension and to be aware of the differences. We are called to ask the questions...

Is this something that is of God?

Is this something that is of the first half of life?

Is there Divine wisdom, in what I am saying, doing, feeling, or believing?

We are called to be mindful of what we are doing, and we are called to practice the Divine wisdom that I am associating with the second half of life.

Now, Jesus spent a lot of time teaching. He spent a lot of time helping his disciples move from the first half of life to the second half. He was all about spiritual wisdom.

When I was in seminary I had an ethics class in which we spent the first five weeks studying the Ten Commandments and the next five weeks studying the Beatitudes. You probably recognized today's Old Testament reading from the Book of Exodus. It is the Ten Commandments. "You shall have no other God's before me" and that includes money. "You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." We teach children not to swear and use God or Jesus as a cuss word. What we need to teach adults is that sometimes we say something is of God but it is the exact opposite of what Jesus would teach. How often have we used God to justify hate? "Remember the sabbath." Mine is on Monday since I work on Sunday. Which day is your sabbath? "Honor your Father and

Mother... You shall not murder.” That includes our U.S. War Department and our continued use of the death penalty. “You shall not commit adultery... steal... bear false witness... or covet your neighbor’s house, wife, or stuff.” When quizzed, we may not recall the exact language of the Ten Commandments, but they are the framework and foundation for what we teach our kids about morality and ethics. This is first half of life stuff. We all want to structure our lives and society on these black and white rules. Except, sometimes living is a little more complicated or nuanced. The rabbis and then the Church have spent centuries splitting the hairs on various circumstances that are murky when it comes to the Ten Commandments. But the Ten Commandments are still a great foundation to teach our kids so that they, and we, know right from wrong.

And two thousand years ago, Jesus raised the bar to a second half of life measure for ethics and morality. In his Beatitudes Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. These are the first five of the nine blessings that Jesus shares in what we call the Beatitudes. Blessings that, like the Ten Commandments, are supposed to be a foundation for living the ethical life, the good life, the life that is of Jesus. But the Beatitudes are not straightforward. What does it mean when Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” We will spend a lifetime figuring out and living into the Beatitudes, but in the second half of life we know that this is the stuff that is worth shooting for. In the second half of life we know that most of living is gray and is non-dualistic. As in today’s Gospel reading Jesus often reverses the normal way of thinking. The first shall be last. Or as we heard read, “the stone that the builders rejected (namely Jesus) has become the cornerstone.”

So today I invite you to follow the Ten Commandments but also transcend them to live into the Beatitudes. And I invite you to start seeing people as nuanced shades of gray. I welcome you to look at some of the people that you dislike with new eyes or even with the eyes of a God who loves all. And I pray that we all journey through the second half of life as we grow into the beauty within us that God has already created.