

**Sermon: The Reign of Christ "Just as you did it to one of the least of these . . ."**

**Sunday, November 20, 2011**

**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**

**Christ Church, Shaker Heights**

**Proper 29 Year A: Matthew 25:31-46**

Yesterday morning our Director of Religious Education, Leslie Swaim-Fox, lead a Safeguarding God's Children training session here at the church. For those of you are not familiar with it, Safeguarding God's Children is a program in the Episcopal Church that is sponsored by the Church Insurance Agency. Its intent is to train clergy and laity in being aware of the behaviors and circumstances that can lead to sexual misconduct.

This training program is a proactive response to the revelations of the past two decades of just how vulnerable people in the greater Church have been to sexual misconduct, especially on the part of clergy. The training and certification provides participants with the knowledge they need to protect the children they know and care for in their personal lives and the ministries in which they serve. Safeguarding's philosophy is that if every adult can protect just one child, they will forever change one life. If we can all change one life, together we will make a difference in this generation of children.

Safeguarding is not a panacea to eradicate all sexual misconduct in the Church. What it does do is substantially reduce the rate at which sexual misconduct occurs. It does so by making us aware as a community of how we are to work collaboratively to be aware of the circumstances in which abuse can occur and to nip inappropriate behaviors in the bud when we see them.

The more we are aware of the signs of potential abuse, the more we can support one another in preventing it from ever happening. Safeguarding mandates that we hold each other accountable for our actions so that we can create a safe environment for all God's children. It takes a community to protect a child from the predatory behavior of a molester.

Since adopting Safeguarding God's Children the Episcopal Church has witnessed a drop in sexual misconduct charges against both children and adults. This drop has occurred because the Episcopal Church has taken the issue of sexual misconduct seriously. We have taken it seriously because we strive to incarnate the Gospel imperative that whenever we protect and take care of one of the least of those who are members of Jesus' family - those who are the most vulnerable - we have done it to Jesus himself.

If only Joe Paterno and his football coaching staff had been required to take Safeguarding God's Children.

If only Graham Spanier, the past previous President of Penn State and the administration of that University, had taken the reports of sexual misconduct by Mr. Sandusky as seriously as it does its football program.

If only the community at Penn State had held one other accountable to the highest standards - and not the bare minimum - to protect the vulnerable children in their midst.

If only they had understood that every adult who protects just one child will forever change one life.

If only they had believed that by changing one life, together they could have made a difference in the lives of eight little boys.

If only.

My intent with these observations is not to espouse high-minded moral indignation at Joe Paterno, Graham Spanier or anyone at Penn State over the tragedy of the sexual abuse of children that has occurred under their watch. Not only is that too easy a response, it is one which fails to acknowledge that we are all vulnerable to the influence of evil that allows us to turn a blind eye to abusive behavior of the vulnerable and weak in all its hideous manifestations. The incidence of sexual abuse against children and all abusive behavior toward the weak and vulnerable will not abate until we acknowledge our own vulnerability to the forces of evil that allows us to ignore.

This past Monday New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote about our human tendency to turn a blind eye to abuse.

“People are really good at self-deception. We attend to the facts we like and suppress the ones we don’t. We inflate our own virtues and predict we will behave more nobly than we actually do. As Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel write in their book, “Blind Spots,” ‘When it comes time to make a decision, our thoughts are dominated by thoughts of how we want to behave; thoughts of how we should behave disappear.’

In centuries past, people built moral systems that acknowledged this weakness. These systems emphasized our sinfulness. They reminded people of the evil within themselves. Life was seen as an inner struggle against the selfish forces inside. These vocabularies made people aware of how their weaknesses manifested themselves and how to exercise discipline over them. These systems gave people categories with which to process savagery and scripts to follow when they confronted it. They helped people make moral judgments and hold people responsible amidst our frailties.

But we’re not Puritans anymore. We live in a society oriented around our inner wonderfulness. So when something atrocious happens, people look for some artificial, outside force that must have caused it — like the culture of college football, or some other favorite bogey. People look for laws that can be changed so it never happens again.

Commentators ruthlessly vilify all involved from the island of their own innocence. Everyone gets to proudly ask: "How could they have let this happen?"

The proper question is: How can we ourselves overcome our natural tendency to evade and self-deceive."

The answer to this question lies in today's Gospel lesson. In fact it is the Gospel that is the missing moral system in our culture today. It is the Gospel that gives people the categories with which to process savagery and scripts to follow when they confront it. The Gospel helps people make moral judgments and it holds people responsible amidst their frailties.

Today's parable distills that moral system we are to follow down to its essence. In it we hear of the second coming of Jesus, the end of time when all things will be judged and the creation restored to the health and wholeness God intends for it. Jesus, the King of Creation, commends those people who have seen those who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick, imprisoned and have responded with compassion to alleviate their suffering. He says that these people are blessed and the heirs of God's kingdom.

Jesus' litany of suffering people is meant to encompass all those who are vulnerable and at risk in the world. When we, Christ's followers, see savagery that afflicts a person in need, the moral judgment we are compelled to make is to help that person as if it is Christ himself. It is Christ who holds us accountable for our behaviors toward the needy and the vulnerable. It is Christ who compels us to heed our Baptismal covenant to, "seek and serve Christ in all persons."

But to those who have seen the suffering of the weak, the vulnerable and those at risk in the world and have turned a blind eye to them, Jesus offers condemnation to eternal punishment. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

The moral system of the Gospel informs us that God will judge us according to our response to human need in this world. The Gospel holds us accountable for what we have done or left undone. Our own judgment will be based on the help we have given or not given to the vulnerable and those at risk. It is a very clear moral imperative.

These acts that Jesus calls us to extend to the young, the needy and the vulnerable are simple one's. But in their simplicity they become powerful acts of compassion in a world that suffers from abject selfishness and the ethos of the value of me over anyone else. These acts of compassion range from offering a glass of water to someone who is thirsty to intervening when we are aware someone is intent on sexually abusing a child. Each of us is capable of these acts if we make the Gospel the plumb line of morality in our lives.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, today we conclude the formal component of our annual stewardship campaign. The Gospel message calling us to extend compassion and relief to the vulnerable and needy of the world is a powerful and compelling reason for us to be generous in the commitment of our time, talent and treasure to this parish.

As you prepare to submit your pledge card, ask yourself this question: in the world of sinfulness that surrounds us, is there anything more valuable than a community of faith holding one other accountable as it seeks to serve Christ in every human being? Is there a pearl of greater value than a church that understands that by working together we will make a positive difference in the lives of not only our children, but our children's children as well?

*Amen.*