

## Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Exodus 22:20-26 and Matthew 22:34-40

Did you notice how much empathy the Exodus reading calls for? Do not mistreat aliens because you know how they feel. Before you harm widows or orphans, consider what it would be like for your own wife and children to be without male protection and support. Do you really want to be an extortioner? Imagine how cold your borrower will be at night if you do not return the cloak you took as security. God anticipates the suffering and relies on our empathy to keep it from happening.

The Torah was unique in the ancient Near East because it explained why people should comply. It was also unusual in its “regard for the human person” and its conviction “that a truly strong society provides for its weakest members.”<sup>1</sup> God requires a compassion that mirrors God’s own. (Recall God names Godself “the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Ex 34:6))

This Sunday’s passage addresses situations where one person has power and the other does not. While the powerless are constantly aware of the powerful, the powerful often do not notice the powerless. We may attend briefly, to donate a few things or a few hours, but then we literally drive back to our comfort zones. If we do something that will really change the status of the powerless, it may change our status as well. Yet we love God and want to do as God asks. How can we muster the empathy God calls for?

God models a way in the final verse, “If your neighbors cry out to me, I will hear them.” God listens. When someone is crying out, are we listening? Do we let ourselves be bothered? God bothers to listen to humans – God, whose thoughts are as far above ours as the heavens are from the earth! (Is 55:8-9) For God, listening yields a perspective of limitless compassion. Would it have the same impact on us?

Here are two examples of how listening to the cries of those who are different have made a difference:

- In 1971, the schools in Durham, NC, were still segregated even though the Supreme Court had ordered otherwise in 1954. The city council organized a ten-session gathering of community members to create a plan. Ann Atwater, a black activist, and C.P. Ellis, the Exalted Grand Cyclops of the local KKK, were asked to lead the charrette. Gradually, they realized how much they had in common, like the difficulties of raising children in poverty or their desire for safe schools. Ellis said, “Here we are, two people from the far end of the fence, having identical problems, except her being black and me being white... Up to that point, we didn’t know each other. We didn’t know we had things in common.”<sup>2</sup> Atwater and Ellis learned to work together and became good friends.
- I taught English for two years to two Syrian refugees. As we talked, I heard the commonalities among the differences. Discussing social media, Feras told of a friend who always posted mundane pictures and how annoying they were. They told of how Faten’s parents wanted to talk to Feras during daily phone calls, how he tried to get Faten to say he wasn’t home and how she wouldn’t. In Arabic or in English, we humans do the same goofy things! Another time, as we talked about mistreatment of Muslims in America, I wanted them to know that not all Americans were prejudiced. Feras said, “In every group, there are good people and bad.” We found common ground in every part of life, including religion, and needless to say, they have become family to me.

When Jesus makes the innovative move of placing love of neighbor on a level with love of God, he concludes, “The whole law and the prophets,” that is, the whole of God’s revelation and human response to it, “hang on these two commandments.” Everything we wish to do to be devoted to God is tied up in being devoted to our neighbors. Listening to God, we hear the command to be compassionate to those who are different; listening to our neighbors, we find plenty of opportunities to do so.

- ❖ With whom do you struggle to be compassionate? How is that person hurting inside?
- ❖ Try to listen twice as much as you speak today. What difference does it make in your ability to be compassionate?

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<sup>1</sup> Craghan, John F. “Exodus.” *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, The Liturgical Press. 1992. pp. 102-103.

<sup>2</sup> “Ann Atwater,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann\\_Atwater](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ann_Atwater). Retrieved 10/19/20.