

“Three Questions”

All Saints Sunday

November 6, 2011

On this day we remember and honor those who have died in the past year, people who lived their lives out as Christians and are part of the Body of Christ. In remembering them we honor them, we remind ourselves how we are connected, and not just to them but to all who have gone before us. But then this day is not just about remembering those who have preceded us in death. It is to take notice how the presence of Christ has moved in the lives of all believers, and to take a close look at what Jesus is doing in our lives today.

Recently I read an article written by Rabbi Marc Gellman. In the article he quotes Rabbi Hillel, who lived in the first century and was a contemporary of Jesus. Rabbi Gellman wrote that the most famous of Rabbi Hillel's teachings was a series of three questions: *“If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?”*

In these ancient words, written 200 years ago, they still ring true and could have been written yesterday. As I think about my life of faith, as I have reflected on the years we have spent together, with all the challenges, surprise, moments of sorrow and times of celebration I hear God speaking to us through these words from Rabbi Hillel. What he asked of the people of God then, I hear God asking us today.

“If I am not for me, who will be for me?”

The obvious answer to this question is that if we are not for ourselves, nobody will be for us. However, the obvious answer is obviously wrong.

There is a long list of people in each of our lives who have been and remain for us, even when we are not for ourselves. Our parents and friends, teachers and families are all for us, all the time. Most of all, God is for us even when we are not for ourselves. None of us came into being by ourselves. None of us have grown up by ourselves. And none of us is able to continue in life all by ourselves. We are part of a larger community made up of various people who have supported us, encouraged us, taught us, and loved us. This is seen and known in the community we call the Body of Christ, the Church.

The right answer to Hillel's first question is therefore to live not a life of selfishness but a life where we are self aware of the vast web of support and love that will never abandon us. We should all know the names of the people on our “Hillel list” and thank them for reminding us that our blessings always exceed our burdens.

The ancient medieval mystic, Meister Eckhardt, was right when he taught, “If the only prayer you ever say is “Thank You!” it will be sufficient.” The deep secret of Hillel's first question is that ultimately there is no “me” without “we”.

“If I am only for myself, what am I?”

This question ought to read, “If I am only for myself, who (not what) am I?” The answer to this question, and the reason for this seemingly careless mistake, is that if we only care for ourselves we become things, not people. We become more a “what” than a who?

All too often we see people marginalized, exploited, reduced to a focus group, or a stat in some arbitrary graph. It is as if we dehumanize each other. We become what Rabbi Hillel would describe as a “what” and not a “who”. Being part of the Body of Christ is to remind ourselves we belong to a community. And being part of this community we are called to think of more than just our personal needs, schedules, or desires. The Body of Christ helps us to focus on something larger than ourselves and to feel part of something that is greater than the sum of its parts. As we learn to think of others, as we help others, we soon learn it is not just good for them; it is good for us. It defines us, expands us and teaches us what Mother Theresa taught, “The fruit of love is service.” Only by getting outside ourselves can we find ourselves.

We must not forget that the link to this is the truth that we are all made in the image of God. Without that morally defining belief, the links between us dissolve into nation, class, political party, or religion. This belief unites us in bonds of compassion that transcend nation, culture and religion and brings us together as the whole people of God.

Last, ***“If not now, when?”***

This is a great question. It’s perhaps the best question. Lying behind it is, “How much longer do I want to live this way?”

There is a fine line between knowing the right thing to do and doing the right thing. We all face many obstacles to doing the right thing now. Our human frailty, fear and shame block and delay us from timely moral action.

The root of these obstacles is our divided nature. We are both saint and sinner. We are at war within ourselves between knowing the right thing to do, wanting to do it, and the fear, shame, and selfish desires to do what is best for our self. The way we resolve this war in our daily lives defines our lives here on earth. It is a struggle each of us face every day this “All saints Sunday”, a day in which we remember and honor those who lived their lives out trying to do the right thing, may each of us discover how to ask, “If not now, when?” and to give the only answer that will make God smile: now, now, now.

May God bless us and help us to learn to live as members of a greater community, the Body of Christ.

AMEN