

Ken Rummenie – January 19, 2003

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time B – 1 Cor. 6:12-20, Jn. 1:43-51

I don't know how many of you remember the World War Two film *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. It's about a group of prisoners in a camp where a cruel commandant imposes severe punishments for the slightest infraction. On one occasion, the commandant ordered the prisoners, in full dress, to march in place 1-2-3-4. One after another the soldiers collapsed under the brutal heat, while their commanding officer marched defiantly on and on. I wonder if at certain times of the church year we feel like this officer, marching in place but getting nowhere. Officially today is the second Sunday in ordinary time. We have six more Sundays of ordinary time, then the Sundays from Lent to Pentecost, and finally 34 more Sundays of ordinary time before we start all over again with Advent. I don't know who applied the phrase "ordinary time" to these Sundays when we're often encouraged to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, I don't think this was one of his (or her) best efforts. I might come to church some Sunday during the summer feeling especially joyful, only to realize that we're still in ordinary time.

I admit that sometimes I used to feel like that officer marching in place 1-2-3-4- but getting nowhere. But then I realized that these Sundays could give us the chance to reflect, not just on Jesus' life but on aspects of our life in the church: what does it mean to live the Christian life? What role should the Bible play in our spiritual formation? For help in such an inquiry I turned to a book by Peter Gomes, pastor of a church at Harvard.

Unfortunately the phrase 'the good life' can have two completely different meanings. One is the self-indulgent life lived by many in the higher tax brackets. The other is the good life which is lived in virtue. Virtue—the right way of thinking and acting. Now there's a good old-fashioned word you don't hear much in public these days. But Gomes, who got to know the Harvard students fairly well and sat in on their bull sessions, detected in them an increased interest in virtue. "My own observation," he writes, has long been that students were becoming increasingly uneasy about the moral dimensions of their education. Certainly they appreciated the opportunity provided by study at a great university, and most of them had done reasonably well at their tasks and had some fun in the bargain. Noble thoughts would appear to be far away from the minds of this indulged and indulgent generation, yet many conversations over recent years have told him otherwise. More and more students are asking questions about the moral use of their lives and their education and about their value, when value questions about education used to be strictly practical. How much in dollars is my degree worth, the students used to ask.

Now however the value questions increasingly have to do with matters of moral value, public and private virtue and a sense of a calling for making a good life and not just a good living. "One student and I," Gomes writes, "over the course of his college career had many conversations about the larger questions of value, virtue, worth and vocation and what, if anything, his college education had to do with any of them.

Obviously we don't have time to work our way through Gomes treatment of all the virtues. But we can consider several points Gomes makes regarding virtue. The first is the relation of virtue to knowledge. Should we expect those who are smarter to be better, to be more virtuous? One

study shows that Presbyterians are the best-educated denomination in the country. That means we're the most virtuous, right? Well, let's say we'd like to be. Gomes poses some uncomfortable questions. Are more highly educated people likely to lie less? To express more humanitarian values? To be more generous to others? To show more concern? We want to believe that smart people should be good people, and that the smarter we are, the more virtuous we will be. But we know, as Sportin' Life said in Porgy and Bess, "It ain't necessarily so." Many brilliant people who were involved in Vietnam and Watergate showed by their actions that they were totally lacking in virtue, which they were morally bankrupt.

But we don't have to go back to Vietnam and Watergate. We need only think of what we saw on TV last summer; polished CEOs of Enron and other corporations testifying before Congress, intelligent, highly educated men who have engaged in behavior that cost thousands of people their life savings. The worst example, of course, is that of the priests involved in the child molestation scandal, well-educated, equipped with all the social skills, but guilty of the most shameful behavior imaginable. As I wrote this, I wondered if I might be just kicking these men when they were down. I hope it won't be taken that way, but rather as a cautionary example helping us to hold our own behavior up to the light.

Gomes raises a further question: since educated people are so often lacking in virtue and students so often show an interest in virtue, should schools, whether a university like Harvard or the local public school fill in the gap by teaching virtue? Is it the task of the school not just to talk about virtue but to teach virtue itself and plant it deep in the hearts and minds of the students? Periodically every school board gets into the debate over whether teachers should try to teach students American values. Parents, particularly of high school students, will say yes, of course, but as soon as they get down to specifics, such as should schools teach students to practice abstinence, a big argument breaks out and everybody goes home.

Even President Bush gets into the question of the relation between knowledge and virtue in his speeches. "There's no capitalism without conscience, there's no wealth without character," he said a while back. Sounds good, but it's totally false. It was capitalism without conscience, wealth without character that enabled the robber barons, the Rockefellers and the Morgans in the 19th century, to make their fortunes in oil and the railroads. Mr. Bush should have said, there should be no capitalism without conscience, no wealth without character, but practically every week the media expose another example of capitalism without conscience, of wealth without character. It seems that Wall Street could use a big dose of character and conscience.

Another question Gomes raises is whether we can be virtuous and happy at the same. We may have the stereotype of the virtuous person as a gloomy sourpuss and of the happy person as smiling with not a care in the world. But it's more complex than that. For the Greek philosopher Aristotle, happiness is the self-discipline that enables us to practice virtue. Happiness is related to the good feeling we get when we do something virtuous. We have to be careful about that one, though, or we'll end up doing good things just for the good feeling they bring. Sometimes there is no good feeling coming from a virtuous action; we might just do what is right from a sense of duty.

At other times we can be surprised. For example, I teach in the Energy program every Tuesday and Thursday, but let's say one Tuesday I'm tired from staying up to watch Monday Night football, and it would be so nice just to stay home. And since Marta runs the program she would certainly excuse me. But I decide to go in and my student, who usually gives me a bit of a hard time, suddenly grasps the point of the math we've been working on. I'm still tired, but the feeling from my virtuous act of fulfilling my obligation, that's happiness. We can't go after happiness directly, it's the byproduct of virtue.

We don't need a profound study to know what we need to do to be good, to be virtuous, to be happy. We know full well that it is better to tell the truth than to lie, better to be loyal than disloyal, better to love than to hate. We believe in honesty, integrity, fidelity and courage. The question is not whether these virtues are true; it is whether we have the willpower to practice them. In a dishonorable world, will the honorable be at a disadvantage. We've seen what happened to some of the whistleblowers in the corporate world, If everybody's doing it and I don't do it, what happens to me? Am I subtly pushed out of the loop?

So virtue can have a cost. Socrates was forced to drink poison for teaching his students to be truthful. Jesus was crucified. Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King were assassinated. Dr. King was probably not surprised when he was shot, he knew that he was living in the cross hairs of a rifle scope. Yet he continued his advocacy, which is simply the virtue of justice in action. Some call it. Telling the truth to power, on behalf of the powerless. Dr. King told the truth to power about the sufferings not just of African Americans but of the poor and hungry everywhere. He was in Memphis when he was killed, advocating for garbage workers, telling the truth to power and calling for better wages and working conditions. Jesus advocated for the woman taken in adultery. She was powerless, so Jesus said to the powerful, 'Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone'

I belong to an organization called RESULTS, which advocates for the poor and hungry. We tell the truth to power, which in this case is the United States Congress. We lobby for the passage of bills, which will give power to the powerless. Sometimes we win: We worked hard to get the extension of unemployment benefits which was passed by Congress and signed by the President.

Sometimes we have only a partial victory, as when food stamps were restored to some legal immigrants, but not all. And sometimes we lose, as with the microcredit bill, which would provide very small loans to people in developing countries, especially to women, to start a small business. The bill didn't pass, but we'll be back. An advocate never quits. An important aid in advocating is the newspapers, which publish our letters and can sometimes be persuaded to adopt the RESULTS position on a particular bill.

If we're trying to live a virtuous life, we have to expect to fail at times. Gomes however hated failure, and was devastated when he had to repeat second grade. The other children, with the sensitivity they always show, called him Peter the Repeater. Instead of the college of his choice, Bowdoin, he had to settle for Bates College. But this failure had the proverbial silver lining. The dean of admissions is to this day his hero and friend. And when his students didn't get their first choice of graduate school or of jobs they interviewed for, he was able to talk about his own failures to encourage them to try again and try harder. .

If we reflect on today's Scripture readings we catch glimpses of failure on the part of Jesus: the disciples who responded so readily to his call at the beginning ended up leaving him to die virtually alone on the cross. And failure on the part of Paul. He wrote probably seven letters to the Corinthians, parts of which are stitched together into the two we have today. The letters written to Paul asked very practical questions. The fact that the questions were asked means that in Corinth certain behaviors were an ongoing problem, from patronizing prostitutes to eating meat that had been offered to idols. It shouldn't surprise us that such behaviors were prevalent, since Corinth was a rough and ready waterfront town, kind of like Buffalo in the Canal Street days, I suppose.

Was Dr. King a failure? That depends on our point of view. Though he espoused the non-violent teachings of Gandhi and tried to instill them in his followers, he was not universally accepted, and there was always the danger that factions like the Black Panthers, more ready to accept violence, would break away. This might be called a failure.

So how are we going to think of these Sundays in ordinary time, as just marching in place 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 or as a chance to reflect on some aspect of the good life that we try to live. During the week ahead we might reflect on the next Sunday's Scripture texts, which are given in the bulletin each week. We know that there is the danger that we will confuse virtue and knowledge, that we think of ourselves as better people simply because we're better educated. And we know that we can't strive for happiness directly, rather happiness is the byproduct of our virtuous actions we do.

Finally, we have to expect occasional failure, just as failure marked the lives of Martin Luther King, of Paul, and of Jesus himself. But our efforts to live the good life, even though marked by failure, mean that Paul could have written to us, as he wrote to the people of Corinth, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you. You were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body."