

21st Week after Pentecost, Proper 22 – Year A – October 8, 2008 Homily
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46
Susan E. Wilmot

Aretha Franklin spells it out for us: R.E.S.P.E.C.T. and invites us to find out what in the world respect means.

At six o'clock, every Friday and Sunday evening at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Beverly, Massachusetts the side doors leading to the Parish Hall are opened. Anywhere between 30 to 50 hungry men, women and children file in for dinner and dessert. Some are homeless, and some are just poor. Some of the clients have psychiatric problems, which make holding down a job pretty tough. Some have substance abuse issues, alcoholism or drug dependency. Absolutely everyone is welcome without question or judgment. Those who work the dinners generally enjoy eating and chatting with the clients and making them feel welcome. We could always count on Paul for some tough questions on religion and life in general. And we could always count on Red's smiling face and firm handshake and his girlfriend Linda, who loved desserts and salad.

From time to time local youth group leaders asked to bring in their youth to serve at these weekly dinners. The regulars would graciously step aside and take on supervisory roles as the teens peeled mounds of carrots or potatoes, sliced up pie and mixed the salad. It was always good to have some young hands and arms to set up the tables and chairs as well. The youth service evenings were always fun, and gave the teens a look at the other side of life.

Holly was one of the teens one week. Young, intelligent, well spoken, beautiful and vivacious, just like you all sitting in the back there. Holly clearly came from a wealthy family – Mom drove a Mercedes SUV and dropped her daughter off with serious trepidation, all the time glancing nervously at the shabbily dressed collection of humanity gathering around the door to the church. I could sense that all she wanted to do was beat a quick retreat and wash her hands repeatedly. Well Holly and her friends did a great job, and much to everyone's surprise about two weeks later Holly came back.

She told us that her experience of serving had been really profound for her and that she had wanted to do more. Holly had then leafleted her entire neighborhood requesting canned goods and non-perishable items. She and her Mom had gone around on the designated pick up day, collected the food, and brought it to St. Peter's. The springs on the Mercedes were groaning a little that night. She had collected over 40 bags of groceries for our clients. How do you think Holly spells 'respect'?

During my time at seminary, I spent three weeks working as an intern at SafePlace. Like our own Safe House here on the Mountain, SafePlace is a non-profit organization that provides a hotline, shelter and other resources for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

I met one young woman and her family at the hospital. I'll call her Jennifer. Jennifer had gone to the movies at the mall, and accepted a ride home from a bunch of guys. Instead of driving her to her home, they had taken her to another house and raped her. Unfortunately, Jennifer was having a hard time understanding that she deserved better treatment than this. Jennifer has low self-esteem and has falsely decided to shoulder all the responsibility for this violent attack, instead of letting the blame rest where it should, with the men who raped her. At the time, her way of dealing with the rape is to brush it off, telling her parents over and over again that it is 'no big deal'. Since Jennifer is only 13 years old, the police and everyone else thought it was a very big deal indeed and were working to capture the rapists. Jennifer's Mom was trying to get her into group counseling at SafePlace. Sadly, due to a lack of funding, the wait list for children's counseling can be up to twelve months. How do you think our society spells respect?

It was also my privilege to meet many women and their children who had made the incredibly hard decision to leave their violent husbands and partners.

One woman, I'll call Amy, had given birth to her third child a few months earlier. Her boyfriend had started beating her during her pregnancy, a common behavior of the men that batter women. All Amy's children were now scattered, and living with various family members around the State. Amy had barely seen her 4-month-old baby son since his birth and had just one well-worn picture of him.

Amy herself is partially paralyzed after her own father shook her violently when she was a baby. Her boyfriend has promised to kill her if he ever catches her. Somehow, Amy found the strength and courage to respect herself enough to put an end to the violence in her life.

When we look at today's Gospel reading, it is simply mind boggling to me why the landlord would send his son to the vineyard to collect his share of the produce after his three slaves have already been beaten up and sent away empty-handed. Some commentators tell us that Luke wants us to believe that the beloved son of this parable is Jesus. Yet even knowing what happens to Jesus, I have a hard time reconciling the facts in this story to the facts of the passion narrative. They really don't match well at all. For example, the death of the son in this parable is completely unwilling and senseless. It is focused on the small group who stand to gain a small piece of property if they kill the son. As we know, the death of Jesus carries a much greater significance. Jesus goes to the cross willingly and His death and resurrection fulfills a much greater plan and purpose. Jesus death and resurrection secures the redemption from sin and death for all nations of the world who faithfully accept Christ's gift. We can be sure of one thing; God does not disrespect His beloved Son, Jesus, by sending him on a fool's errand.

So what is the lesson about respect in this parable, and all the other stories we've heard today? In other words, how do you think God spells respect? We will only truly know what it means to Aretha, Paul, Red, Linda, Holly, Jennifer, Amy, and to you and to me, when we know what it means to God.

Amen