

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51: 3-4, 12-15; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33.



by Patricia Delgado

Jeremiah tells us that the Lord said, “I will make a new covenant with you” (Jer 31:31). Now, it’s not like the covenant of old, which was based on rules imposed from outside. That didn’t work! It led to disobedience. Instead, the Lord is making a new covenant with us, “placing it within us, writing it on our hearts”(Jer 31:33), forming a new relationship. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” (Jer 31:33). God says “All will know me, for I will forgive their sins, and remember them no more,” (Jer 31:34).



In Psalm 51, we ask God for a clean heart, for mercy and compassion!

And in the Gospel today, we hear that if we seek that loving and serving relationship with God, (if we really mean “Thy Kingdom Come”, when we pray), then Jesus promises “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (Jn 12:32).

I believe this is the Good News of Restorative Justice! We are all called to open our hearts to all those involved in the criminal justice system. As soon as we frame the conversation into “us” and “them”, identifying the “them” as different and less human than us, we can judge, exclude, punish, retaliate. God is telling us that keeping people identified as ex-convicts, or felons, long after they have completed their sentences, ensures that they will struggle for jobs and housing. Denying people dignity and a chance to rehabilitate is our sin, not theirs!

Jesus did not separate himself from the poor, the marginalized, the mentally ill. He did not treat them as second class. He modeled a different behavior for us, not the “us and them” so-called “justice system” we have accepted in our country—even while knowing that it doesn’t work—not for the victim, not for the offender, and not for the community.

When the victim is allowed to speak and be listened to, and the offender has a chance to accept responsibility, but allowed to explain what happened and why, and when he or she can apologize and offer restitution, what happened is not erased, but a path forward can be opened up that allows healing for all concerned.

I believe that God’s promise to have a new covenant with us, written on our hearts, can only happen if we are open to letting it happen. We cannot be afraid of relationships. Fr. Greg Boyle says that the sin of Dives (the rich man in Luke 16) was not in being rich, but in refusing to be in relationship with Lazarus. When we accept the dignity of all life, we will understand why the death penalty is contrary to Jesus’ teaching, why we are called to spread awareness of the injustices of our system.

If we open ourselves to listening and forming a relationship with people we are afraid of, we can, in good faith, ask for a clean heart, and a steadfast, willing spirit. And we can be ready for the time of judgment, ready to be drawn to Jesus.

Patricia Delgado is a retired public school teacher and a mother and grandmother. I became involved with El Pasoans Against the Death Penalty through my work with Pax Christi, and in recent years was asked to help coordinate the Diocesan Restorative Justice Ministry. I am very grateful for all I have learned and the wonderful people I have met through my volunteer work.

