

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Earlier this week I observed a gathering of about 15 men who are thought to be among the most likely to kill someone in Kansas City. The meeting was sponsored by the No Violence Alliance, a group representing law enforcement, community leaders, faith-based organizations, and those affected by violent crime. The No Violence Alliance identifies people at high risk of acting violently or being a victim. The presenters included Mayor Sly James, Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker, Deputy Police Chief Cheryl Rose, US Attorney Tammy Dickinson, a former felon, and several mothers whose children had been murdered. They all promised these 15 men a better way to live through social services, job searches, and protection from gangs. But they also warned that the next gang responsible for a homicide in Kansas City would encounter strong and immediate action from law enforcement. They promised hope, but they also promised punishment. I have invited the No Violence Alliance to St. Anthony's next month for a meeting in Spanish to reduce the threat of crime.

Punishment and the threat of punishment should help people become better human beings. We all experienced this as children. We didn't like it when our parents punished us, taking away electronics or not letting us play games. But usually punishment helped children make better choices. Sometimes it does not work this way. When some people are punished, they get angry and misbehave worse. Other times the people who punish go too far. Some parents abuse their children by hitting them. Abuse does not teach children to do the right thing. The best motivation for obeying is positive: creating a better world. But others will only obey if the motivation is negative: the fear of discipline.

Sickness and other adversities are usually different. Sometimes sick people say, "I don't know what I did wrong, but God is punishing me." Others feel this way if they lose a job, suffer a theft, or receive an unexpected bill. They ask, "Why is God punishing me?" Sometimes we bring adversity upon ourselves, but bad things can happen to good people.

In today's second reading, the Letter to the Hebrews expresses another opinion about suffering. Good Christians were asking, "Why are we suffering so much? Why is God punishing us when we have been so faithful?" The letter gives this advice: "Endure your trials as 'discipline'; God treats you as sons." The trials you undergo are not punishment for sin; they are discipline to make your faith stronger.

Olympic athletes make sports look easy and fun. But they did not gain expertise by accident. They worked hard on a discipline of diet, exercise and mental toughness in order to make them who they are today.

We each have that opportunity in the spiritual life. The hardships we endure are not a sign that God has abandoned us. They signify that God is behind us, like a good parent, helping us endure these trials so that we can face even stronger ones to come. You may be wondering, "Why am I suffering?" Whether you face the challenge of a new school year, new responsibilities at work, an illness, or a change in your primary relationships, it may not be that you've committed a crime. You may be just fine, but God would like you a little better.