

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week a group of Catholic high school students posed on Snapchat with beer pong cups arranged in the shape of a swastika. The photo went viral, the school punished the students, alumnae were outraged, and the students have written a letter of apology. There are lots of questions about the incident: how to stop underage drinking, whether parental consent was involved, whether the punishment was too light, and how well the girls understood that a swastika promotes hatred against Jews. But there is no question about this: What they did was wrong. Turning the swastika into a plaything overlooks the slaughter of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust during World War II. It raises fears that a hatred of Jews could once again go unchecked as people prefer to look the other way.

Meanwhile, a national debate is broiling over football players taking a knee during the National Anthem in order to protest police brutality against blacks. There are lots of questions over this as well. Some say it is unAmerican; others say it expresses free speech. Each side believes that it is right. Even though people hold such opinions strongly, there really are two ways to look at taking a knee. But there are not two ways to look at swastikas. They are symbols of hate.

We have all performed actions that we wish could be erased, said words we wish we could take back. With the ever-growing presence of cameras and recording devices, people can scrutinize our sins in the present and remember them for ages to come. Our expressions of remorse may be sincere, but often not as newsworthy. St. Teresa Academy has accomplished a lot of good over its history of Catholic education. It was founded over 150 years ago right here at the corner of 12th and Washington, and it has produced many excellent graduates. It's the oldest school and women's organization in Kansas City. Now, because of the misbehavior of nine students off campus after school hours, for many years to come a search engine looking for St. Teresa's is going to turn up beer pong cups instead of its storied history. Search engines remember what we want them to remember. It's not fair, but we are all guilty of remembering the sins of others without sufficiently researching the good they have done.

"It's not fair" is a complaint that the house of Israel raised against the Lord in the time of Ezekiel the prophet. Like the son in today's gospel, the people of Israel had said good things, but did something wrong. And like the other son, some who said wrong things repented. Through the prophet, the Lord turns the tables on Israel's complaint. "Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair? When someone virtuous turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity.... But if he turns from the wickedness he has committed, he does what is right and just." Good people who sin will be punished. Sinners who repent gain reward.

Sometimes the sins of others also uncover our own responsibility. If students in a Catholic high school have not learned that underage drinking is dangerous and that the swastika is a symbol of hate, who is at fault? How do we prevent such mistakes in the future? If we have not promoted learning about history, if we have tolerated drug and alcohol abuse, if we have maintained prejudices against Jews, then we should turn from the wickedness we have committed and practice what is right and just.

Sunday, October 1, 2017