

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Hos 2:16b, 17b, 21-22

Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-13

II Cor 3:1b-6

Mk 2:18-22

Paul W. Galetto, O.S.A.

The difference between understanding and compassion is the difference between the mind and the heart. I can understand the biological nature of cancer, but when I know someone who suffers with it I grow in compassion. I can understand the theory behind marriage, but when I experience someone who lives in a loving relationship I grow in compassion. I can understand the economic principles of supply and demand, but when I work with the poor, I grow in compassion.

In the Gospel today Jesus is confronted by two diverse groups, the disciples of John the Baptist and the followers of the Pharisees. Both groups were opposed one to the other, much the same as liberals to conservatives. And yet, they seem to have found common cause in this questioning of Jesus: "Why do we fast, while your disciples do not?" Their lack of understanding comes not from their politics, but from their lack of compassion. The challenge that Jesus directs toward them is the difference between understanding and compassion, between matters of the mind and habits of the heart. In the response of Jesus, it is not enough just to fast, but to fast with the goal in mind. We must do what we do with the right motive, for the right reason. It is not just enough to understand fasting; we must grow in the compassion of fasting.

This coming Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. We will undertake disciplines for the benefit of our soul and our relationship with God and others. We may understand that such things are required of us, but will we approach them with compassion? If we just abstain from meat on Fridays because it is the rule, we gain little if anything in the process. We must do more than understand the rule, we must grow in compassion. We abstain from meat because it is a symbol of wealth and by denying ourselves we seek solidarity with the poor. If on a Friday of Lent we go to a restaurant and have lobster and shrimp we can say we have understood the rule, but we cannot say that we have acted in compassion with the purpose of the rule. It is this compassion that the Lord advocates in today's Gospel. Once we have become compassionate, we can no longer put the new wine into the old skins because we never see things the same way again.

This Lent if you only understand the rules and disciplines associated with the season, then you need to grow in compassion. Seek the habits of the heart by working with the poor, helping the elderly, caring for the displaced and loving those who are without. In these ways you will move from understanding to compassion and be enriched beyond measure in the process.