

Solving the World's Problems

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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I'm sure all of us have had those late night conversations with family members or friends where we 'solve all the world's problems.' We come up with all of the things that should be done in order to make the world a much better place: plans to end hunger, formulating perfect foreign policies, and dealing with all the social ills of the day. While we may be onto something in our discussions, the greatest temptation that we have is to keep pointing to problems 'out there.' 'The government needs to..., the Church needs to..., the Pope needs to...' The question that probably gets avoided is, 'what do I need to do...what are my problems that need to be addressed?'

In today's Gospel from Luke, Jesus asks his disciples, "Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own?" In other words, why do you see everyone else's issues except yours? In fact, as Jesus suggests, sometimes the one pointing out all the problems has greater issues to deal with than the ones who supposedly are the problem. A wooden beam is much bigger than a splinter!

It has been said that the only person we can change is ourselves. I think that is true. Each one of us is asked to look into our own hearts and see 'the store of evil' within us. We need to figure out our blind spots, lest we turn into 'the blind leading the blind.' Yes, there are problems 'out there' that need to be addressed. Yes, we are to be activists for the betterment of the world. But no, we are not exempt from acknowledging and accepting the evil that is within us. Each of us has our biases and prejudices that keep us from seeing reality objectively. Focusing on everyone and everything else is a diversion tactic that never leads to conversion. Perhaps this Lent, which starts this Wednesday, we can work on our own conversion, not everybody else's.

Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who was put to death at age 29 in Auschwitz, wrote a diary about her experiences in the years during that horrific time in human history. Here is a woman who had every right to be mad and point the finger at the evil around her. The world was indeed terribly wrong. Yet, on February 19, 1942,

she wrote in her diary, “the rottenness of others is in us too. I see no other solution than to turn inward and to root out the rottenness here. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves, and that seems to be the only lesson to be learned from this war.” What a deep woman. Nothing, not even evil incarnate all around her, was going to divert her from her own personal conversion.

Jesus asks us to face the evil within ourselves before solving the world's problems.

Question: Have I adequately explored my own evil before trying to solve the problems of the world?

Pointing the finger isn't helpful. Blaming and complaining just makes us bitter and hard to be around. Let us acknowledge and deal with the 'store of evil' within us so that we may be converted and give way to a new store within us, a 'store of goodness.'