



Stamford Eparchy Sobor

The Vibrant Parish – a place to encounter the living Christ

Serving One's Neighbor – Diakonia

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April 20, 2013

“The Vibrant Parish – a place to encounter the living Christ.”

Serving One’s Neighbor – Diakonia

Good Morning, and welcome to the third session of “The Vibrant Parish—a place to encounter the living Christ.” Our topic this morning is serving one’s neighbor. In the pastoral letter from our Beatitude he talks about diakonia which means serving in love or performing “charitable activity.” This service to our neighbor flows from our rootedness in Christ. Jesus tells us that “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” God has created mankind to love one another. Christian kindness is a way of life. His Beatitude says that the Lord wants us to open our eyes to the suffering world so that we might learn to truly love and to express God’s love to our neighbor—by our attention to them, by our sincere sympathy, support, by our words of encouragement and good cheer, but mainly through acts of mercy.

At the Inauguration of his Papal Ministry, Pope Francis in his homily asks us to be “protectors.” “It means respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about. It means caring for one another in our families: husbands and wives first protect their children, and children themselves, in time, protect their parents. It means building sincere friendships in which we protect one another in trust, respect and goodness. In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it. “Be protectors of God’s gifts.”

I am sure that most of us had a nice breakfast this morning at our hotel, but did you know that one billion people in the world are suffering from starvation. In this country alone it is estimated that as many as 17 million children are struggling with what is known as food insecurity. To put it another way, one in four children in this country are living without consistent access to enough food to live a healthy life

I am sure that each of us were able to brush our teeth and have a drink of water this morning. Yet more than 3.4 million people die each year from water, sanitation and hygiene causes. Lack of access to clean water and sanitation kills children at a rate equivalent to a jumbo jet crashing every four hours. I am sure that each of us had a nice night's sleep and we will be able to return to our homes this evening, yet in 2010 it was estimated that more than 42 million people were displaced by natural disasters and 3 million people by conflict.

We live in a world that has many extreme and urgent needs. We also live in a world that is developing a sensitive conscience to these needs. These needs include such things as dealing with worldwide food shortages, growing poverty in the world, ecological destruction, water shortages, displaced people as a result of civil and international war, people with physical and mental challenges, etc., etc., etc., Diakonia is the heart of our church mission. It is our duty and call to mobilize the people of God, and bring God's presence to a suffering humanity.

James 2: 14-16

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for a day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what is the good?

In other words, we have an obligation to help meet the needs of the less fortunate among us. When we talk about “Serving one's neighbor” the first question that comes to mind is “Why should I?” In researching the topic, I found a poem that asks that same question.

Why should I give aid to someone
I don't even know?

Why should I give money
To a homeless man to blow?

**Just because they are out of work
Should I help give them food?**

**If I spend cash upon myself,
Am I considered rude?**

**Because their shirt and jeans are worn,
Should I give them clothes?**

**Should I be concerned they're sad,
And should I share their woes?**

**Should it matter they are aged
And feeble in their health?**

**Should I care of their problems
Or of their desperate plight?**

**Should I care they may not
Sleep in a bed tonight?**

**Should I assist in helping them
In any way at all?**

**If I take care of "my" own needs
Is my thinking small?**

The Answer reads

**You were given aid from parents
At the time of your arrival.**

**Although you were helpless
They guaranteed your own survival**

**You performed no labor
Your Mother did it all**

**You could never feed yourself
You were much too small**

**You were bathed, and then kept warm
You had someone capable to protect you from all harm.**

**When you were hungry and cried out
You were kindly fed.**

**When you were filled, you then slept
You had no fear or dread**

**You grew from infant to a child
You had need of clothing**

**You were given clothes to wear
With love and not with loathing.**

**In all phases of your growth
Your many needs were filled**

**GOD has given us a life
Much more precious than we know**

**What we do with what we got
Will ultimately show.**

**Do we appreciate His gifts?
Are we selfish when “we’re” blessed?**

**Do we really care of our fellow man
Or is it just professed?**

Serving one’s neighbor. Again I ask the question, “Why should I?

Saint Teresa of Avila writes, “Christ has no body.”

**Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours**

**Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on the world
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.**

St. Teresa's message is that we have the tools and the duty to carry out the Great Commandment. The Bible tells us in Matthew 22, Mark 12 and Luke 10 that the Great Commandment is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind", and the second being "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Each Sunday we have recited the Eparchial Sobor Prayer asking, "Give us the grace to model our lives according to the Word of God. And Inspire us to follow your great command to be a servant to the less fortunate among us!"

The next question that comes to mind is "who is my neighbor?"

The answer can be found in Matthew 25: 40. "And the King will say to them in reply, Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Luke 10: 25-37 tells us the story of a scholar of the law who stood up to test our Lord, and said "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, "You should love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." He replied to him "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus then told the scholar the parable of the Good Samaritan and relating the parable Jesus asked “Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers victim?” He answered, “The one who treated him with mercy,” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

The parable teaches that God is the Father of all of us and therefore we are brothers one to another. My neighbor is my brother. Everyone is our neighbor.

Knowing why we should serve our neighbor and who our neighbor is leads us to our next big challenge. To get involved and to get others involved in serving our neighbor.

A newspaper reporter once secured an exclusive interview with the devil. The reporter was especially interested in the Deceptive Techniques around which the devil had built his reputation. “What is the most useful tool you use on People?” he asked. Is it Dishonesty?, Lust?, Jealousy? No, No, No, chuckled the devil. The most powerful weapon I possess is Apathy. An “I don’t care” attitude will strip life from the loftiest dreams.

If you want to make a difference in this world, in your life, you will need to develop and keep a positive attitude. We cannot change our past ...we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way, we cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude.

Today you can grumble about your health or you can rejoice that you are alive.

Today you can lament over what your parents didn’t give you or you can feel grateful that they allowed you to be born.

Today you can cry because roses have thorns or you can celebrate that the thorns have roses.

Today you can mourn your lack of friends, or you can embark upon a quest to discover new relationships.

Today stretches ahead of you, waiting to be shaped and you are the sculptor who gets to do the shaping.

I am amazed at the change in attitudes that we develop as we grow older. I look back at my 32 years as an educator, 22 as a Superintendent of Schools. I would walk into a kindergarten classroom and ask “Who can draw?” All of the hands would go up. Yes, of course we can draw – all of us. “What can you draw?”, I would ask. Anything!

“How about a dog eating a fire truck in a jungle?” Sure, how big do you want it?

If I asked them how many can sing? All the hands would go up again. “What can you sing?” in would ask. Anything.

“What if you don’t know the words?” No problems, we will make them up.

If I would ask this group who would like to sing or volunteer for a project, most of your hands would not go up. What has happened to that enthusiasm, the confidence, the belief in the fact we can do almost anything we want to do.

Are we so afraid of failure, or what others will say that we no longer want to try.

I believe that one of the reasons we have lost that enthusiasm is that we have become content too soon. It is good to be comfortable with one’s present position in life, but you should always have a further goal, a greater dream. It is the desire to improve and to improve the lives of others that brings success? Comfort leads to apathy and indifference – two evils we must combat everyday.

Emily Dickenson wrote,

**“If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin,
Into its nest again,
I shall not live in vain.”**

Did you notice that nowhere did the poem mention the solution to world problems? What the poem says is that each of us should try to make the world a better place in our own special way.

Now it is time for you to meet the challenge to make the world and your parish a better place. I know in your mind you are saying that I am only one person. How can I make a difference? You are only one person, and you cannot do everything, but you can do something. And what you can do, you ought to do. And what you ought to do, by the grace of God, you should do. I would ask you to take my pledge and make it your plan for making a difference.

I WILL DO MORE THAN BELONG—I WILL PARTICIPATE

(Are you personally involved in performing charitable works of mercy, or do you support such activities in the parish?)

I WILL DO MORE THAN CARE—I WILL HELP

(Do you offer your Time, Talent and Treasure to your parish? Do you encourage your family, especially your children to perform acts of mercy, in word and in deed?)

I WILL BE MORE THAN FAIR—I WILL BE KIND

(How do you respond when a person of need comes to the door of your home or if you happen to meet such a person on the street?)

I WILL DO MORE THAN TEACH—I WILL INSPIRE

(Teaching consists not only of the words we speak, but through our example of being a good person we can inspire people to follow our lead.)

I WILL DO MORE THAN GIVE—I WILL SERVE

(It is easy for us to throw money at a project. But is better if we give of our time and labor. In the words of Mother Teresa, “Love is not patronizing and charity is not about pity, it is about love. Charity and love are the same—with charity you give love, so don’t just give money, but reach out your hand instead.”)

I WILL DO MORE THAN LIVE—I WILL GROW

(Each of us needs to take time to grow. To better understand ourselves, and our neighbors.

Each of us needs to understand what is God’s plan for us.

I WILL DO MORE THAN TALK—I WILL ACT

Can you share some treasure? Give a soft answer? Encourage youth? Manifest your loyalty in word and deed? Keep a promise? Find the time? Forgo a grudge? Forgive an enemy? Listen, and apologize if you were wrong? Try to understand? Think first of someone else? Appreciate? Be kind? Be gentle? Laugh a little, laugh a little more? Decry complacency? Express your gratitude? Go to church? Welcome a stranger? Gladden the heart of a child? Take pleasure in the wonders and beauty of the earth? And speak your love of God and family?

Remember that words carry a powerful message.

[The Power of Words - YouTube](#)

Now the task at hand is to ask you to discuss Diakonia in your Parish, in your personal life and in our Eparchy.

IN MY PARISH

- a) **What does my parish do to help those who are in need to encounter the living Christ in our community?**
- b) **What kind of programs and structures would I like to see in my parish, so that it can better respond to its mission to serve those in need?**

IN MY PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE

- a) **In what ways can I PERSONALLY support the charitable work of my parish community?**
- b) **What are some of the things we can do in our personal lives and with our immediate family to help those in need?**

IN OUR EPARCHY

- a) **What are some of the ways that our Eparchy has worked to help those in need over the past five years?**
- b) **Looking forward to the next five years, what are some of the things we could do as an Eparchy to help those in need in our community?**

In closing, this session is like my magic coloring book.

**You entered without knowing what to expect.
We have given you an outline of what you can do.
It is now up to you to fill in the pages.**