

Homily for the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (A)
St. Joseph's Neier July 26-27, 2014
Rev. Kevin Schmittgens

Central Idea: The gift of wisdom is not a gift that everyone receives, yet it is extremely precious.

*Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart
to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.*

Today I would like to talk about three things I cannot talk about.

Even though it seems like I have been gone from the parish for two weeks, I actually have been working this week in my new job at Borgia. Even though I have only been at the job for less than a month, I can already tell that it is going to be challenging. It is not that there is a lot of mind numbing paperwork, like grading, but in the ability to read situations and figure out the best course of action while still staying true to myself, to the school, and to the Catholic faith, as well as respecting the dignity of others makes for a daunting task.

As you might guess, there is no exact playbook involved. Anyone who tells you they know EXACTLY what they would do in certain situations, has either never been in certain situations or, to put it bluntly, is a fool. The seminary prepared me for certain things, to be sure, but there is a lot, an awful lot, actually a vast majority of things for which I was totally unprepared and had to make my best pastoral decision. I found myself, like Solomon in our first reading, praying for an understanding heart, a heart that would have to make painful, difficult, thorny decisions.

Which brings me to the three things I cannot talk about. I would love to flesh out this homily by giving you some concrete examples from my real life, things I have had to deal with and make judgment calls on, things that call, literally, for the wisdom of Solomon. I would love to present all the facts and nuances to you and maybe have a discussion about how you all would handle the situation. Now THAT, that would be a homily!

Unfortunately, little things like confidentiality, discretion and professionalism keep me from discussing these things. The best I could do is to tell you some of the principles and guidelines I use to make these decisions.

1.) The Objective Facts. Wisdom does not turn a blind eye to the facts of a situation. In fact, wisdom looks at things as honestly and as openly as possible. I do no one any favors when I fail to see the truth of a situation and all of the sides of an issue. That includes most of all what the Church teaches about something. My problem is that some

people only look at one aspect of what the Church teaches, the one aspect that favors the position that they are most comfortable with. Amazingly, the Church has a rich tradition, a tradition that goes beyond the simplistic and the one-dimensional. Take for instance the Church's stance about just war. The Church allows the use of force, but only under strict conditions.

2.) What is the Ideal? The Church always calls us to something great, something better, something richer. We have a God who was willing to take his love to the utmost level, dying on a cross. Likewise we are called to something beyond what others would normally think. Any teacher understands this. There are times when we would love to say that perfect comeback. There are times we would love to put that wise guy or that little princess in his or her place. There are times when we would just like to let loose. Unfortunately, or rather fortunately, a teacher has to remind themselves, probably on a daily basis, that, indeed, they are the adult here, they are called to a higher standard. This plays an important role in the application of wisdom in our lives.

3.) A willingness to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty. On the other hand, we do not live in a perfect world. Sometimes, well, an irritating lot of the time, things are not as clear, things are not as simple. Sometimes people's lives are messy, complicated, awkward and chaotic. I wish things were different. I wish we all could get along. I wish things were neat and tidy. They are not. We live in a real world. A world that demands that we make a decision, a decision that often has conflicting and competing values vying for dominance. One of the huge struggles I have had in my priesthood is dealing with the messiness of everyday life. But, and this is key, that is where most of my pastoral decisions are made. What has always amazed me about the Church is that it is surprising pastoral and open. You may not believe it, but I have found that to be true. Many years ago, this is a story I can tell you, I found myself in a bit of a bind with a wedding that I was to do between two 78 year olds. I didn't get all the paperwork completed. Telling them to wait wasn't a good option. So, I called the Catholic Center, nervously told them my sob story, begged forgiveness and asked "what I should do?" Do the wedding, they said, and then just get the paperwork in next week. Whaaat? It was that easy.

4.) Treat others as children of God. We are Pro-Life. How most people define that is being against abortion and certainly that aspect is correct. But we shouldn't and we can't be so narrow about that. It also applies to real life people who have issues and problems and treating them with respect and dignity. To be honest, my three issues would be much easier to deal with if I just did not care about the feelings or the lives or the souls of the people involved. It would be easier if I was blind to their individual circumstances, situations and positions. I would simply make my decision and go have a beer. But my ideal calls me to something greater, something more loving, something more charitable and compassionate. I am called to use the same gift that Solomon asked for.

That pesky, irritating, infuriating, yet vital, understanding heart.