

Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Times

October 21-22, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6; 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5B; Matthew 22: 15-21

Preacher: Brigit Hurley

Today's Gospel reading appears to be "ripped from the headlines," raising issues that have been in our news and in our public discourse lately about Americans' values—such as, questions about separation of church and state, and about the obligations of citizens toward their government (or in the case of some NFL players, its flag).

We find Jesus standing with a crowd, fingering a Roman coin handed to him by Pharisees and Herodians. They planned this "gotcha" moment with the hope of catching Jesus either advising them to pay Caesar's tax, which would alienate his followers, or advising them to not pay the tax, which would bring retribution from Roman authorities. Jesus replies: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Rev. Margaret K. Schwarzer paraphrases Jesus' reply: "Then give to Caesar the things stamped in his likeness that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are stamped in his likeness that are God's . . . Jesus wants his audience to understand that just as coins stamped with Caesar's image belong to Caesar, so do human beings, stamped with God's image, belong to God."

"Jesus' response does not offer us clear-cut guidance on how to balance secular and religious commitments; it does not tell us how much we are to contribute to the poor and the needy. Instead, it pulls us more deeply into discerning for ourselves what we owe to beings who carry God's image within them."

What we owe to beings who carry God's image within them.

The Children's Sabbath is celebrated this weekend all over the United States, including more than 50 congregations from a variety of faith traditions here in Monroe County. Together, we lift up children in prayer, and we lift up our voices to speak on their behalf. Their care and protection is completely in our hands.

Locally, faith communities believe we owe children a childhood free of trauma and deprivation, so they are advocating for restoration of funds for programs that prevent child abuse and neglect.

If we truly believe that children are a reflection of God, would we tolerate this?

In Monroe County, the number of reports of child abuse and neglect is projected to reach 10,000 in 2017. That means 27 reports every single day.

About 90 percent of these reports are based on possible neglect, not physical or sexual abuse. Because neglect has a broad definition, it can include the following scenarios:

- 1) A child is repeatedly sent to school with inappropriate outerwear—because his parents can't afford to replace the coat he lost;
- 2) A child is absent from school frequently; she is kept home to watch younger siblings—because the babysitter is unreliable and mom will lose her job if she doesn't go to work; or
- 3) A young single mom is yelling at her misbehaving 1-year-old child in a store —because she's 17 and needs encouragement, mentoring and parenting education.

Unfortunately, serious abuse does happen and must be stopped. The death of 3-year-old Brook Stagles in 2016 is a tragic example.

But in many other cases, Child Protective Services is responding to concerns about families who face great challenges, and who lack the support and guidance that most every parent needs. Some can turn to family and friends for help and relief. Others are not as fortunate. They are isolated and stressed, in need of professional help.

Services like family therapy and home visiting help families build a healthy, stable future. Yet County funding for these programs has been cut. If we say that we value children, then we must be willing to pay for what we owe them – a good start in life.

Here's what you can do:

- 1) Pray for children and parents who are struggling, that their needs will be met with dignity and compassion;
- 2) Sign the Children's Sabbath advocacy letter requesting restoration of funds for evidence-based programs and services that prevent child abuse and neglect – click [here](#) to send your letter to County leaders electronically.