

## It's Nice to be Nice to the Poor

I really enjoy watching M\*A\*S\*H. I marvel at how well Larry Linville portrayed the character of Frank Burns. There are so many things he does and says that can make you crazy or are just hilarious. One of his great lines that my wife and I throw around is this one: "It's nice to be nice to the nice." It is a pathetically lame statement that comes as a surprise that becomes really funny. It is a meaningless statement that reflects a commitment to being inoffensive and pleasing people at all costs for the sake of having people think well of you. It's a statement that does not seek to love people, but instead to use people in a self-serving way.

"Let's all be nice to each other" is the rallying cry of tolerance. What the world needs now is nice people. But nice people don't change the world, they simply manipulate it for their own purposes.

I am finding that this is a new move in the church. It's nice to be nice to the poor... if we have time. We want to help the poor, but not if it means changes to our programs, building projects and missions. That is what is really important and if we can help the poor in the process, all the better. Then we can feel good about ourselves at the same time. We will be nice to the poor, but in reality all we are doing is using the poor for our own purposes. Ironically, the poor seem to be happy to allow this to happen. If the church is willing to give money so it can feel good, they are happy to receive it.

I do not think this is the model Jesus was pursuing when he said

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Reading this one gets the sense that His concern for our friends and neighbors who struggle with poverty was central to his objective. The complex economic systems that we have created in the world has created a scenario in which some are favored and some are not. With selfishness and self-preservation as the primary mode of operation for people living without Jesus, this is to be expected. It is no surprise to me that sinful humanity has created such a situation. It is unjust, but I am not surprised.

But for body of Christ to perpetuate this same agenda is unjust. Consider for a moment what the kingdom of God is suppose to be. In our hope for the fullness of the kingdom we see people from every ethnic and economic background gathering together as the perfect expression of the body of Christ. Can we attain this on earth? Is not our praying of the prayer - "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" - is that not seeking to realize the kingdom of God here on earth with his priorities and objectives. But when we relegate this to a subservient role to our building programs, patriotic celebration and social agendas, are we not becoming counter to the bringing of the

kingdom? Aren't we just perpetuating the sinful social order that we expect from the world?

Broadly speaking, what are the priorities that the Church of Jesus Christ should be pursuing.

- Loving God and loving our neighbor
- The formation/discipleship of the faith community – loving one another
- Regard for the weak: the orphan, the widow and the stranger
- The proclamation of the gospel in word and deed

These are to be at the core of the mission of the church. When these are central, the priorities and activities will flow out of them that become expressions of the mission.

What is the paradigm that derails this? What perspective causes us to loose focus? I believe it is the paradigm of personal piety. We must keep in balance the kingdom of God as the formation of a people, a community and the personal growth of the individuals in that community. Either extreme will create a heretical distortion of the Body of Christ. We are at a point in the history of the church that is dangerously focused on personal piety to the neglect of the others, such that Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees should be carefully examined by the church today:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!  
You travel over land and sea to win a single **convert**, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. Matthew 23:15

If we perpetuate a personal piety paradigm, we are creating individuals who are consumed with their own spirituality that is no different than the spiritualities in the marketplace today. Our churches become spiritual country clubs and the poor are pitied and used for developing our own spirituality. It is all so self-centered. It is nice to be nice to the poor. We are praised for our nice deeds and we feel good about ourselves. But it costs us nothing. And our "converts," having no concept of a truly Christian community transforming the surrounding community, are destined for condemnation. This is not what Jesus came to do.