

4th Lent B

If we want to avoid making a difficult decision, there are several sayings and quips to help us. "Out of sight, out of mind." "Ignorance is bliss." "Denial is not just a river in Egypt." We all have times when difficult decisions were delayed because we did not want to face them, and could for a while deny the problems even existed. But the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel offered better assessment of our present national situation, "In a democracy, not all are guilty, but all are responsible."

In the Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Leading the Hebrews through the desert, Moses lifted a serpent mounted on a pole for those who lost the moral path and decided to find their own way to the Promised Land. Soon, they discovered that their own foolishness came back to bite them like snakes, and tear them apart. When Moses lifted the serpent, the Hebrews had to look upon the consequences of their own actions, but also recognize the power of God's mercy over their sinfulness and foolishness.

There was a front-page story in **The New York Times** on December 9, 2011. The article was headlined "Lead from Old U.S. Batteries Sent to Mexico Raises Risks." These are the opening paragraphs from that story.

"The spent batteries Americans turn in for recycling are increasingly being sent to Mexico, where their lead is often extracted by crude methods that are illegal in the United States, exposing plant workers and local residents to dangerous levels of a toxic metal.

The rising flow of batteries is a result of strict new Environmental Protection Agency standards on lead pollution, which make domestic recycling more difficult and expensive, but do not prohibit companies from exporting the work and the danger to countries where standards are low and enforcement is lax.

Mexican environmental officials acknowledge that they lack the money, manpower and technical capacity to police a fast-growing industry now operating in many parts of the country, often in dilapidated neighborhoods..."

The article goes on to report that many recycling plants in Mexico with poor environmental safety regulations often expel toxic lead smoke into the air. Particles of this toxic air then fall on neighborhoods; including playgrounds, food sources and clothing. Health officials do not know how destructive this is to children's development, because very few can afford the \$100/per child to test for levels of lead in their blood.

American recycling plants abiding by strict environmental regulations and the companies recycling batteries responsibly are also adversely affected as other businesses ship south of the border where dumping these batteries is considerably cheaper. In addition, lead, now a scarce and valuable resource, requires companies manufacturing batteries to look beyond our borders for such purchases.

Some might say there are simple solutions to this not illegal but highly immoral business practice. We could lessen environmental standards in our country. But how many would be

willing to subject their children and community to higher levels of lead toxic air? How many would want their son or daughter to work in such a factory? Some might suggest that Mexican villagers can simply wash the lead from their playgrounds, food and clothing. I'm sure if these villagers had a clean water supply, they would have done that long ago.

There is no simple solution, but only difficult choices. Pressure needs to be applied to companies knowingly shipping batteries to substandard recycling plants in Mexico. Those American and some Mexican companies that abide by tough environmental regulations also need to be recognized and supported. Laws need to be enacted, and current legislation needs to be enforced. Battery manufacturers must also join the fray as a voice of decency and moral business practice.

If we insist on our companies abiding by stronger and safer environmental standards, will this increase the price of their products? I would not be at all surprised. There are consequences to every action and every choice. Are we really benefitting from lower priced products if their cost is based on endangering the health of entire communities in other countries? Like the Hebrews in the desert, are we merely trying to find a cheaper way to the Promised Land, even if that means further expense for someone else? Are we only setting ourselves up to be bitten by the serpents we thought were working for our best interest?

If we say, "we didn't know this was happening," we can say that no longer, for now all of us know exactly what is happening supposedly for our benefit.

Again in the Gospel, Jesus says, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God." These works of darkness have been exposed in part by the light of a free press. But others following the light must now help call to accountability and repair the damage.

The story of dumping used batteries in a poor nation unfortunately is not an isolated example. Rather, similar stories are repeated in poor countries continually. Corporations from richer and more affluent nations find poorer countries with little organized governments easy prey for losing their toxic waste. Poorer countries lacking workplace safety regulations and fair wages become easy pickings for exploiting workers, including very young children. All of this contributes to our standard of living by providing manufactured goods at inexpensive prices. But at what cost? As The Lord says in the Gospels, "What good does a man show who gains the whole world but loses his soul in the process?"

Other works of darkness stand needing to be revealed. How long did we expect to dump toxic waste into the air, the water and the soil before it came back to bite us like serpents? How long did we expect to exploit poor people for their labor so we could live comfortably before it came back to bite us? How long did we expect to sell everything by sexualizing it before it came back to bite us? How long did we expect to borrow the next generation's money for current expenses before it came back to bite us? How long did we expect to wage a war on two fronts for ten years and cut taxes before it all came back to bite us?

The list can go on and on. If we respond with "There is nothing I can do," we are in danger of denying our faith. If we say, "There is nothing I will do," we are in danger of rejecting the faith. But if we say, "I do not know what to do," then we have taken the first step to open our hearts and minds to the possibility of change. Change will almost always be difficult and will come

slowly and at times be frustrating and discouraging. That is why we need to reflect on the cross of Our Savior.

The cross is a double-edged sword revealing both judgment and mercy. Reflecting on the cross will open our eyes to the injustices of the world. We will come to know at times our guilt, but more often our responsibility to alleviate the suffering of others. But reflection on this same cross will reveal for us God's powerful love and offering of redemption.

Redemption is a gift that forgives the weight of sin, heals the wounds of injustice and restores the human community to solidarity and peace. But redemption is a gift that needs to be embraced. If we choose redemption, we not only welcome God's forgiveness, mercy and healing in our lives. Redemption obliges us to be healers of the injustices we know exist in the world around us.

Our communion of life with these Mexican villagers has been violated by immoral business practices, endangering all their lives but especially their children. Workers in these factories are exposed to dangerous working conditions and low wages. These same offensive practices rob upstanding and ethical companies along with their workers from good paying jobs. "Ignorance may be bliss," but ignorance is not redemptive. "Out of sight" may mean "out of mind," but could also mean "out of sight of redemption." More truthfully, "In a democracy not everyone is guilty but all are responsible."

Those seeking truth will be drawn to the world's violence and chaos and find the crucified and Risen Christ. The cross has been revealed in these villages subjected to the horrors of sinful dumping and toxic poisoning. Divine light has revealed the works of darkness and given judgment. Divine mercy now offers the gift of redemption.