

A Higher Court of Things



by Rev. Ronald Rolheiser

Perhaps more than anything else, moral issues are what divide us. Sincere people, who can agree on almost everything else, often find themselves painfully divided over issues such as abortion, gay marriage, just war, capital punishment, immigration, and economic justice.

One of the reasons for this is because, purely at the level of justice, each of these is very complex. Inside of each there are certain competing rights which will always make for disagreements in terms of what is asked for by strict justice.

Take capital punishment: We argue back and forth about whether or not it is a deterrent to crime, whether or not it eases the hurt of the families of the victims, and whether or not it is humane; but each of these questions is arguable and each side compiles its own statistics and anecdotal evidence to support its arguments. Simply on the basis of justice, a strong case can be made either way.

However, if we move the argument into the realm of Christian discipleship, the ambiguity disappears: For a disciple of Jesus, capital punishment is always wrong and should never be done (independent of any arguments about justice) because it goes against the very heart of the gospel, namely, we are supposed to forgive murderers not kill them. Jesus is clear on this: He challenges us to forgive those who murder our loved ones and who might indeed murder us. The capacity to forgive a murderer is one of the litmus tests for Christian discipleship. This where Jesus most stretches the heart.

The same is true for a number of other divisive moral issues: abortion, immigration, just war. In each of these there are elements of justice that compete with each other and it is not always clear what justice, all on its own, demands. Strict justice, unlike the gospels, does not demand that we forgive those who have hurt us, does not demand that we turn the other cheek when someone strikes us, and does not demand that we take the high road rather than the way of

recrimination. But the heart of Jesus' teaching does ask this of us. It asks us to move beyond justice to a compassion, understanding, self-effacement, and selfless love that, like the Father of the prodigal son and older brother, can bring God's understanding, love, and forgiveness to every situation, including murder.

Biblical principle mitigates justice and takes us beyond it. In justice, for instance, we can argue about whose rights are to be defended on the issue of immigration. Biblically it's a lot clearer: The earth belongs to everyone equally and we have a right to surplus only after everyone else has what is necessary for his or her subsistence. There are higher principles than justice.

This is true too of abortion: In justice we can argue about the competing rights of the unborn for life and the mother for the freedom of choice, even if one does outweigh the other. Biblically though it's clear: God is the author of all life and human life is sacred, all of it, and it is not our prerogative to ever actively snuff out a human heartbeat.

What isn't everywhere clear in justice is much clearer in discipleship. But inside of secular society, laws aren't always made on the basis of Christian discipleship. Hence we have to try too to argue our moral principles from a human and rational point of view. After all, every one of these moral issues very much affects the common good and each is as much a human and moral matter as it is a religious one.

But, as we know only too well, inside the court of rationality, public opinion, and politics, we don't always win. We lose as often as we win and, too often, we get lost ourselves in the raw struggle to win.

And yet we need to continue to be a moral voice on all of these issues. As painful as it is to divide ourselves from others by taking an unpopular stand on moral issues, Christian discipleship demands that we continue to try to make a case for what we believe to be right inside the arenas of public discourse and politics.

However we need to accept too that, when we argue solely on the basis of justice, we will experience a lot of strong counter-challenge from good, sincere people. We live in a very large and diverse family, in a democracy rather than a theocracy, and we are not free to impose our morality on others. Much as we would like to, we can't always shape our laws.

But we can shape our hearts and our consciences and there, given the invitations of Jesus, we find demands that go far beyond the demands of justice. It's in the invitation to deeper discipleship where it is clear that we must forgive murderers rather than execute them, that the earth belongs equally to all, and that God alone has the power to decide life and death.

Ron Rolheiser

San Antonio, Texas

May 27, 2007.

