

I suppose it’s true. As you get older there are certain things about your life, your personality, that become clearer, or ought to become clearer, that is if you are paying attention. Something I’ve noticed about myself, from the vantage point of looking back over my life is my tendency to deny my need for help, in fact, to deny my neediness in general.

Now, I raise this issue with an awareness of my own sense of risk. I’m very much aware that the culture that so thickly surrounds us colludes with my own tendency to this denial. Competence is a minimal presumption of entrance and participation in this culture, and mastery or proficiency is expected. But not only that, I find that just asking someone for help can suggest disability or even invalidity. I don’t know about others but my tendency is to mask or to hide my neediness, my inability to perform or function adequately in such surroundings. In these cultural surroundings we collude with each other in our isolation and our delusion of self-sufficiency. Everybody is so very busy and some among us are always held up as exemplary and excellent examples of competence and the result is that we are reluctant to ask for help, to suggest that we are not likewise so busy and so competent that we need nothing.

But I’m not so sure that this embarrassing disclosure is my own or even ours alone. Indeed, it seems to me that it’s part of the human condition. We are created needy. Isn’t that the point of the Genesis story of creation: “it is not good for man to dwell alone.” We are created for relationship. It is part of our nature to be needy. It is something to be affirmed and gloried in that we need help of all kinds, that we depend upon each other for our very being. But in tending to deny or hide our neediness we deny our nature and in our quest for self-sufficiency we replace a relationship of appropriate dependence on God and on other human beings for idolatry where we mistake ourselves for autonomous gods.

In fact I think that our national tendency to obesity and toward runaway “competitive consumption” of all kinds is largely a reflection of our national anxiety about the meaning of our role as the only superpower and about our ambivalence toward the self-sufficiency required of such a dominant world posture. We satiate our overt needs – physical needs of nutrition and shelter; social or systemic needs of status and esteem –denying the deeper meaning and goodness of human neediness itself: the invitation to intimacy, solidarity and generosity. As the nation in the world that perhaps has most consistently claimed to be guided by gospel principles and whose population pervasively names Jesus Christ as its model, we are torn by a contradiction in our national character.

For on the one hand in this parabolic prophecy of the Last Judgment Jesus makes the point that he is present as judge in the least, in the weakest, the poor, the victim, and invisible outcast. On the other hand, our international role as the just and benevolent

super-power causes us to deny our neediness and embrace an idolatrous myth of self-sufficiency. And yet our blindness is exposed by our very model.

This gospel read on the Last Sunday after Pentecost, the last Sunday of the Church year, also known as “Christ the King Sunday” because it focuses our attention on the Last Day when Christ will come to be our judge, has the same impact as the other parables of Jesus. It startles us to see a truth we are normally blind to. It calls us to see Christ in the neediest, in the people we hardly ever even look at.

This is a startling scene. Especially today with rapidly increasing economic globalization when we are in fact ever more dependent on, yet insulated from, people all over the world, on poor people we never see or think about, for the very life we live, this is a startling scene. In fact, even when those people live nearby us we tend to ignore them or even to look upon them with fear and hostility. Denying our need for illegal undocumented workers in our own communities, we argue that they should be thrown out denying that there is no one to replace them at the wage and conditions that only they will work at.

Or even in our own families and communities those who do not excel at the kind of self-sufficiency that our culture regards are regarded as morally or mentally defective. The sign of self-sufficiency for us is consumption. In contemporary American culture, consuming is as authentic as it gets. “I consume, therefore I am.” The cultural motto of our society where it is ultimately competitive consumption that matters is “God helps those who help themselves.” Denying our own neediness and the web of interdependence that sustains us all, we look upon those who cannot or will not “help themselves” as failures.

And yet Christ, the King who comes to judge us, makes clear that unless victims are truly seen for whom they are, the mirrors of the neediness and violence within each one of us, the hope for human redemption remains unfulfilled. Even our tendency to view this judgment as an individual matter, which our cultural formation trains us in, distracts us from the real issue. And that real issue is that what the church has called, from reflection on this gospel passage over the past century, “the preferential option for the poor,” enables the birth of a new culture of communion, grounded in the modeling of the imitation of Christ that challenges and weakens the idolatry of our self-sufficiency.

There is a slightly bizarre but apt illustration about the difference between heaven and hell. A man was allowed a preview of hell. He noticed that people were starving apparently because even though they all had long fork like utensils that were attached to their hands rendering their hands useless, they were too long to fit into their mouths and the only way they could eat was from these long forks. He next went to survey heaven there to discover the secret. The only difference between heaven and hell was that in heaven people with the same non-removable long fork-like utensils were feeding each other.

Our neediness our dependence on one another is the source of our redemption. It is the datum, the puzzle of our existence. We are not so much called to equality or even to equity, which can suggest parallel self-sufficiency, but to surrender, the surrender of the chimera of our self-sufficiency. At its heart this is a surrender to fearlessness, to risk, and to a trust that all our needs will be fulfilled by God; and it is a surrender to generosity, in the intention that all I have and all I am is to be offered to others, because ultimately it already belongs to them, to us, to all of the community, in the first place.

Asking for help is a spiritual practice. It is an acknowledgment that I need you, and that you need me—that we need each other. By asking for help, by imitating the neediness of Jesus in the least of the members of his family, that is the human family, we become sensitized to the presence of Jesus in all those we may be fortunate enough to be able to help. And thereby, as we extend to them some blessing, we receive a greater blessing. We are united to one another and to Jesus Christ in our common need and our common graciousness.