

Do You Feel Useful, Needed?

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, September 12th, 2010

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’” (Matthew 25:34-36)

There are times in all of our lives when we do not feel very useful or needed. As students in high school or college many of us were frustrated by not seeming to have any real place in society because we were not yet engaged in any life-work or occupation. We needed others, but seldom got the impression of being needed except in a rather superficial way. Then later on even as employees involved in some work or profession we have all experienced at least occasional doubts as to the true value and significance of what we were doing, and may have wondered whether the world would get along just as well (or better!) if we weren't doing it. Husbands and wives all go through states of doubt about their significance in the lives of their partners, feeling perhaps more needy than needed, and now with all the millions of people in the world with all their countless skills (and so many clearly wiser and better than we are) we may sometimes feel there is little need for us anyway, anywhere, as others can and (in this economy) very well may take our place. Finally, there is the pain and isolation of old age, when physical limitations take their toll on our ability to perform even the most menial or routine tasks. How useless and forsaken our elderly sometimes feel!

The teachings of our church certainly are very clear about the importance of being useful; in fact they say that in the last analysis *everything* comes down to a question of use, for all love comes to rest and clothes itself by means of wisdom in use. So we read, for example,

“All joy, bliss, prosperity, happiness and delight in the heavens is in the affection of use for the sake of use, and is according to the quality of the use; in fact, heaven is a kingdom of uses . . .” (S.E. 5155).

Further, being useful is defined in part as performing one's function and doing one's work rightly, faithfully, sincerely, and justly (D.Wis. xi:4). It is said, “doing is use; and therefore we define use as the doing of good from love through wisdom . . .” (C.L. 183:3). Again, emphasizing doing, the teachings say, “To do truths is to perform uses” (D.L.W. 251:2).

Now it does not take very much imagination to conclude how people who are unemployed – or even underemployed – might feel reading or hearing passages like these. First, they already know the frustration, emptiness and degradation of their circumstances, then when they see that heaven holds no place for the inactive it is a double blow.

Fortunately the teachings about use and usefulness go far beyond our ordinary concepts of work activity, occupation, production and material effects. The prophet, Micah, made this point when he asked, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to humble yourself to walk with God? (6:8) for he spoke in abstract terms, not saying what we must do, but that

whatever we do, we must do it justly. This also is in keeping with the Golden Rule: – “Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12)

This brings to mind the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he should DO to inherit eternal life, and the Lord had him review the commandments – none of which, by the way, were related to occupation or employment, only to the laws of moral and civil life. When he said he had done all those things, Jesus told him he lacked only one more thing, and that was NOT more work but more humility. “Go,” He said, “sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matt. 19:21). In the context to sell what you have is to give up the pride of ownership and control, to let go of what we call the *proprium*. True, the Lord’s words emphasized giving, but more the spirit of giving than the gift itself. For as He said elsewhere, the kingdom of God is not a worldly kingdom, thus not one of worldly things or actions, but it is within us and it is established in the heart (John 18:36, Luke 17, 21, Matt. 5:8).

So what ARE uses, really? In one sense, our doctrines note, almost anything that comes from a cause and exists in effects is a use, that is to say, everything we do is useful, *but it may be useful for good or evil*. We could just as well say, it may be productive of good or of evil (DLW 336). But in a more restricted sense, only GOOD uses are from the Lord. So what is a good use? Basically, it is anything anyone does for the sake of others outside of self; and this it has from the Lord because the Lord does *everything* that He does for the sake of others. This does not necessarily involve physical effort but neither does it relieve us of the physical responsibilities and opportunities we have to act on our intentions. Remember the parable of the talents. Remember, too, the teaching that “the first of charity is to look to the Lord and shun evils as sins” (Ch. #199). If charity is the attitude of kindness and helpfulness to the neighbour it is of course vital to understand that this begins by knowing what is kind and helpful so that we can avoid what is harmful. This knowledge comes from the Lord, as does the power and courage to act on it.

“Uses,” we read, “are the bonds of society, which are as many as there are good uses; and uses are infinite in number. They are spiritual when they have to do with love toward God and love for the neighbour; they are moral and civil when they have to do with love for the society and state in which a person lives, and with love of the companions and fellow citizens with whom he is associated. They are natural when they have to do with love of the world and its necessities; and they are corporal when they have to do with the love of self-preservation for the sake of the higher uses. All these capacities for being useful are inscribed on the human spirit and follow in order one after the other; and when they exist together the one is within the other...” (CL 18).

Please notice that in this reference all the uses are aligned with loves, for it is love that inspires use or effort. In fact, as the Lord repeatedly points out, it is always the quality of the love that determines the inner quality of the use to which it leads. Otherwise God, who looks on the heart, could not possibly judge people according to their works. True, an evil person can do something that will benefit others – maybe in a very big way – and this of course appeals to the love of self, pride and ego, not to mention the understanding that it will help to secure some profit or gain in the world, but if it springs from self-love it is really only an expression of self-love and so confirms the person’s place in hell (despite the good that is done). On the other hand, a good person can do something that has very little impact in a physical way, and possibly doesn’t even help at all, but because it is done from a sincere love for others it has a very positive effect in spirit and

can make all the difference between hope and despair, between comfort and loneliness, between blessing and sadness, in short between heaven on earth and a living hell.

Consider the effect, that is, truly speaking, the use, of a confident, compassionate look, with a simple, tender word or gesture given sincerely from one person to another: the Lord actually healed dozens, perhaps hundreds of people during His earthly life with no more physical effort than this. In fact, to see the other side of it, perhaps the most dramatic thing He actually DID in an active, physically assertive way was to upend the tables of the money-changers in the temple and chase the villains out. So symbolically He taught by his actions that the most aggressive and assertive thing WE can do for the world is to get rid of the evils and falsities invading the temple of our own minds! And, of course, He promised that if we would make that effort in the simple, obvious things of life, He would come to our aid in the complex, internal things we cannot see, and work with us (DP 100).

Again, to make the point as clear as possible, consider the effect, that is, the USE of extending a thoughtful, prayerful, respectful attitude toward others, whether they are needy or not, or if that's too hard consider how it feels to be on the receiving end of such respectfulness and consideration. It is one thing to be served, even served efficiently, but it is another thing entirely to be served with genuine care, concern and a very friendly, reassuring smile. In these small, simple gestures we actually provide services that go way beyond material needs and touch the spirit, building trust, encouragement and a sense of community.

You can see how little physical effort this may take if you consider visiting a wise or cheerful person in a hospital or convalescent home. Often you will find there is a kind of innocence, tenderness, judgment, and yes, even strength flowing from that person, so that you feel humbled and renewed and inspired by the visit. Sure, the time there can be disturbing and uncomfortable if we focus on the physical problem, but if that person helps us focus on eternal values, and brings us into contact with the angels of heaven he or she may actually be performing a greater spiritual USE than the one who builds or manages the hospital or gives the money to make that possible.

In the lesson from Matthew the Lord spoke of the importance of DOING good things for one another in the world, saying, "...inasmuch as you have done (good) to one of the least of My brethren, you have done it to Me" (25:40). And He listed six of what we might call representative deeds. Can you remember them? – Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and going to those who are in prison.

Now the question is, how did the Lord mean these things? Are they required as physical acts for us to get into heaven? – to be conjoined with Him? If so then what about those of us who have very little to give? What about those of us with very little time or income, or who have disabilities that keep us from being active? In the end, if we think about providing only physical relief we may well be reminded of the Lord's teaching, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). The truth is that the Lord's Divine Providence has regard for what is eternal, and for what is temporal only so far as it relates to what is eternal. So in order to understand the acts of charity that He listed we need to think about their *spiritual* meaning and application. We need to be concerned about *the real people inside their physical shells*, which can sometime be even more challenging than just providing external comforts. It is a humbling thing, and takes patience, and it requires the opening of our own spirits to the Lord.

Briefly, then, to feed the hungry is to provide the goodness of love for those who need and want it. To give drink to the thirsty is to share the knowledge of what is true out of the wisdom of the Lord's Word with those who acknowledge their need and who are seeking as a thirsty man seeks water. Remember Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). To welcome the stranger is to provide for anyone who comes visiting in a spiritual sense, that is, who comes enquiring and willing to learn. One who is "naked" acknowledges that of himself he has nothing that is good or true; one who is "sick" acknowledges that he is involved in evils that correspond to the evils of disease; and one who is "in prison" clearly is as he himself perceives it constrained or limited, by the falsities that he longs to break down and clear away so that, as the Lord said, the truth can make him free (John 8:32). Therefore to minister to all these states is to be attentive, to be sensitive, and to be active in response – as much as we are able – to the spiritual life in the people and in the spheres of people all around us. This can't help but lead to attentiveness and acknowledgment of our own spiritual needs, and so to an increased sense of dependence on the Lord who will give life and strength and spirit accordingly (AC 4958). "Freely you have received," the Lord said, "Freely give."

Doing what is useful, thus the delight of use in which the whole of heavenly life consists is not just doing worldly things. Rather within whatever worldly activity we are able to achieve, it is first and foremost the acknowledgment of the Lord, then it is the spiritual discipline of shunning evils as sins against Him, and finally it is the love of the Lord *expressed in love toward the neighbour*. It IS the doing of truth; it IS the doing of good; but in these most of all it is the doing of whatever we do from good will **because the Lord has said so**, without thought of reward – except perhaps the reward of feeling happily fulfilled, inwardly energized by the Lord in that effort. And this reward, this wonderful feeling, is something that is denied to no one, however humble, however handicapped, however frail his or her circumstances may be. Any of us can reach out and receive it from the Lord's hand at any time for it is His almighty and everlasting love to give it; all WE have to do is care, truly care, and then give whatever it is we have to give for others, for their sake and not our own. It might be thoughtfulness or concern, it might be prayer or a listening ear; it might be patience, forgiveness, a word of encouragement or even just a smile. But just as the love flows out, just as water flows out of an infinite reservoir, more love – and fresher and clearer and better love – flows in from the fountain of the water of everlasting life to take its place.

Amen.

Lesson: Psalm 15
Children's talk on the first & second principles of usefulness (i.e., charity)

Matthew 25:31 - end
Conjugal Love #5:3 and #6:6

Note, a little handout that goes with the sermon, a small card to save as a reminder and to serve as "food for thought."