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Whatever you did for one of these, the least among you, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

Lev 19:1-2, 11-18; Matt 25:31-46

Today’s readings from Leviticus and Matthew not only spell out the moral and social codes for ancient Israel and the early church, they also provide a window into the conditions highlighted in both the Commandments and Corporal Works of Mercy. There must have been lots of instances of defrauding people, withholding wages over night from laborers, corrupt judging, slander, neglect and revenge in Israel when Leviticus was being composed. The Torah was vigorously renewed after the exile and return from Babylon in the 6th century BC, and no doubt crimes against the poor were seen as one of the reasons for the punishment of the exile. The return and restoration of the nation brought a determination never to let this kind of injustice happen again.

The same was true for Matthew’s forms of sufferings that described the plight of the poor. Disciples were not only to believe in Jesus, they were to serve him in the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and the alien resident. Neglecting them was to neglect him and to be liable to judgment. One factor identifying the Christian communities in Antioch and in other cities around the Mediterranean was that they cared for the poor. The early converts to the church were also drawn from among

the poor -- slaves, household servants, laborers, the underclasses and outcasts of society.

This closeness of the church to the poor was what attracted Dorothy Day to convert and later found the Catholic Worker Movement. It was also why so many immigrant groups and the working poor were once the backbone of the Democratic Party in the United States. Even as Catholics moved up socially and economically, the ideal of caring for the poor and downtrodden was a strong part of the church's identity. Catholic faith was synonymous with Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

Lent calls us back to the inseparability of our faith and the service of others, especially the poor. If "Faithful Citizenship," the voters guide from the US Catholic bishops, makes one thing clear, it is that our elected leaders should care about the poor. In his inaugural address in 1960, 60 years ago, President John Kennedy said this: "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich."

That address* is part of the legacy of this country's slow and often halting progress toward its founding ideals and the universal principles they drew from. One of those principles is that the measure of our humanity lies in how we care the most vulnerable among us. May our Lenten journey in 2020 lead us back to the values our faith is based on and forward to the restoration of their truth, not just in words but in action. *

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