

Keynote 23rd National Council Meeting
UCCP Crossroads Congregational Church- Davao City
August 20, 2019 - 7:00 AM

Theme: "Making the Teachings of Moses and the Prophets Come True in these Changing Times"

Text: Matthew 5:11-20; 38-44

By Bishop Jaime R. Moriles

Good morning. I am honored that I could share to you my thoughts before this Assembly of legislators of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. You have a big role to play considering that what will transpire in the next two days, same will be communicated by each one of you back to your respective constituents in the Conference, organizations, and governing bodies. If you will be sending mixed signal to your constituents because you yourself were not convinced by what was being acted upon in this gathering, you are cooking a good recipe for misunderstanding and dissension. Each of us in this assembly, in one sense, is a significant resource person in the context of where you come from for us to better craft well-informed pieces of legislation. But as our ideas intersect with others contrary to ours, it is but normal for us to defend them with all your might just like defending a prized possession that's worth dying for. But at the end of the day, we must never forget how democracy has valued, ultimately, the principle that the minority must always submit to the majority.

We are now on our second year of this quadrennium and under this new leadership, its second year of uninterrupted mudslinging and character assassination against our Church leaders, including the Bishops of the Church, in the social media. But as always, our theme has constantly been our beacon that guided us and this year's sub-theme showing us the way of Jesus as epitome of Moses' teachings and the Prophets. The text in the gospel of Matthew chapter 5 is essentially the lesson our sub-theme wants us to draw inspiration from, inviting us to make real the Law of Moses and the Prophets in our lives. How to make these come true, the first clue from Jesus' words reverberates, "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." And he continued, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for great is your reward in heaven." And turning to his disciples, Jesus pointed to them, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world..." And after he challenged everyone to let their light shine before people so that everyone can see their good works in order to glorify God, Jesus wanted to not offend his righteous hearers or the Pharisees present and declared, "I did not come to abolish the law or the Prophets but to fulfill them."

I have not spelled out our sub-theme for this year at the outset that runs, "Making the teachings of Moses and the Prophets come true in these changing times." Let us explore the significance of this theme as we try to extract, for example, one of the teachings or Laws of Moses in the Old Testament. One of these let us remember runs, "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth." I did not arbitrarily choose this as a point of reference for our reflection this morning because it was Jesus himself who highlighted this in our text. He said, "You have heard that it hath been said, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth:' But I say unto you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well." Implicitly, Jesus is saying to us, "if you can do this, you have fulfilled the Law of Moses and the

Prophets in these very demanding, highly volatile changing times.” In what way? Turning the other cheek after you have been slapped does not mean that you wanted to be slapped again. Offering the other cheek shows your desire to maintain a lasting relationship in love. That someday your cheek would touch against your detractor’s cheek. Call that a “biso-biso” or whatever it doesn’t matter because what you want from her or him is that someday you want him or her to kiss you! This is how to fulfill the Law of Moses in our lives. It is basically living out God’s law on love fulfilled by our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are more profound insights that I need to underscore from this preaching of Jesus. One, just because there was an implied command not to retaliate, you might think that doing so is consequently right. “No, you are completely missing the point,” Jesus would tell us. “What I’m trying to say,” Jesus would insist, “is that, each time you see the person that humiliates you, that dishonors you; that sullied your reputation; no matter how he or she has marshalled all his or her energy, writing ability, resources to destroy you; no matter how dark his or her motives were; you have to look at her or him in love.” See? And if fight is imminent, do not turn your back, face the fight, but fight in love. Because even if you turn your other cheek but there is hatred in your heart, this cannot pass the test of blessedness. Being aggressive or simply being composed is not the measure. It is how you respond to the circumstances or situation in love.

In this assembly I assume our church will take action on the spate of killings against ordinary individuals, professionals, even clergies happening not only in Negros but across the country. The FOC might also be expanding their statement on LGBT. Why are we doing this? Because we love people; we love ordinary folks- the marginalized, oppressed members of society, those ridiculed, bullied because of gender preferences, the minorities, the IPs. On the third day we will have time to visit the Lumad community now residing in Haran to hear directly from them the difficulties of dislocation. We need this kind of information so that our love for others will grow; our love for the unjustly treated will be exercised. When we seem to have forgotten our physical exercise and our tummy begins to grow and hypertension sets in, doctors would always remind us to never take for granted physical exercise. Similarly, we need to exercise our love for others, our love for the poor, our love for the least and the disadvantaged in order for our love muscle to grow, reverse the risk of “arteriosclerosis” or “hardening of the wall” that constricts human interconnectedness.

Fyodor Dostoevsky in his novel “The Brothers Karamazov,” lifted up his heart in adoration and said, “love all of God’s creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things. Once you have perceived it, you will begin to tirelessly perceive more and more of it everyday. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an entire, universal love.”

I suppose the CCUU or the Commission on Church Unity and Union may have been, by now, entertaining the call of Bishop Erme Camba’s 70th Anniversary message to include the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches in the conversation so that we could also enter into formal agreement with them like our covenant with the Iglesia Evangelica UNIDA de Cristo and the Concordat we entered into with the Iglesia Filipina Independiente because in the uniting assembly in 1948 the assembly voted to consider the CPBC as a constituent member of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

At the turn of the 20th century the American missionaries who came over representing different boards or denominations sat together to prayerfully plan efforts that would avoid conflict in carrying out missionary activities to different parts of the country. As our forbears endeavored to create the Evangelical Union in 1901 for us to get united, then the Union Church of Manila in 1924, a localized version and somewhat precursor to the UCCP, then the United Evangelical Church in 1929, then the Evangelical Church in the Philippines during the second world war, and finally the United church of Christ in the Philippines in 1948- we must not put to waste their sacrifices for us to get united by infusing ideas that run contrary to their dreams and aspirations that faithfully responded to the call and prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ that “we may all be one.” In that prayer, and in the prayer of mainline Protestant missionaries in the Philippines shortly after they first set foot in the country, Presbyterians, Congregationals, Methodist Episcopal, Disciples are no more but one Church as they painstakingly envisioned overtime to become the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

Most of you may not have known, I suppose, that this Church, Davao UCCP at the Crossroads, has filed a case against the United Church of Christ in the Philippines for nullification of our existing Constitution and By-Laws. But let me tell you that I admired the most ardent proponent of this case, Mr. Gabby Atega, for his levelheadedness. He said in one of our conversations, “Bishop, I don’t have problem with the Church because what I was raising was purely technical in nature.” And the most admirable part that I discovered from him is that, he has no facebook account. In short, you can never see him engaged in a tit for tat discussion on facebook regarding issues of national importance in our Church unlike myself who was embroiled in a tit for tat after Pagmata visited UCCP Maasin in Leyte. I hope the technicalities Mr. Atega raised will soon be resolved so that Davao UCCP will be spared by thousands upon thousands of pesos of litigation expense when this case becomes full blown and it would be to the best interest of the entire Church if a non-adversarial option can be done.

Let me continue. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is telling us what he was already espousing here and there in the gospel. This is about his penchant to bring to light two opposing extremes: poor in the spirit as against rich in the kingdom; weeping as against rejoicing; hungry as against being filled. Here emerged what he wants us to see: that there are two roads, one is the road to life and the other is the road to death and destruction.” There are two trees, one bears good fruit and the other, bad or can poison. There are two houses. One is built on the sand, and the other is built upon a rock. In effect Jesus is saying to us, “Choose between two ways, two kinds of life, two houses, two trees. But what will confound us in this invitation to choose is that in reality all these look the same. But one of these roads, absolutely, will lead you to perdition; one of these fruits will poison you; one of these houses will crumble and fall upon you. Question, “How can we recognize them?” This adds up to our problem because Jesus did not say, “this way, not that way. This tree, not that tree. This house, not that house. And the most difficult of all because Jesus did not say that, “these are the people who are faithful to God, and these are the people who are not. These are the people who are praying, and these are the people who are not praying.” Jesus did not say these. What he did say instead was, “they were praying like that, but among you, pray like this.” He did not say that there are those who helped the poor and there are those who did not. But instead, he said, “give like this.” Did Jesus say there are those who have principles in life and there are others who have none? “Who cares,” Jesus would say “whether or not you have principles in life?” What you hear from Jesus, he said, “Come, follow me,” whether you are principled or not; whether you are intelligent or not. This is an existential challenge and invitation.

The fact is, Jesus did not divide people into two groups because the distinction Jesus made in the text about two opposing extremes is only intended for teaching purposes. The fact remains, both are hearers of the word. Both are insiders!

This is not my idea. This is what verse 19 of our text is telling us, it says, “whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” You see! One shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven and the other will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Did you see? Both are in the kingdom of heaven. Let us remember Jesus’ Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. In that Parable the kingdom of heaven was compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from? He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

All these took place in God’s own field. Not in other’s field. But in God’s own field. Both are inside God’s kingdom. But one is considered least in the kingdom and the other is considered great in the kingdom. But how do we identify the wheat? Easy! First, they can be right away seen. Why? Because you will shine. As Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven.” Second, people will like you. Why? Because as in food, you tastes good. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth.” When you eat something and you like the taste, you will not say, “the salt was great!” Why? Because the salt is not the menu. Relationship is! And if you can be something that can provide people just the right amount of flavor in your relationship, even your enemy will just come to you naturally. Why? Because you are just so tasty, irresistible, you look yummy!

And this last one is important. Jesus said, “Think not that I have come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I have come not to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, not a jot nor the smallest detail of the law will disappear, till all be fulfilled...For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” No one has exceeded the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees except the one who fulfilled the law of Moses and the Prophets. It is Jesus. How did he fulfill it? This is what you need to finally hear. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” But Jesus, even though merciful did not receive mercy: he was brutalized. He said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. But Jesus, while pure in heart did not see God. He was abandoned and in the cross he cried, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” Jesus is meek but he did not inherit the earth. Jesus said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” No one was hungry and thirsty for righteousness than Jesus, but no one can compare the injustice he bore in the hands of the Roman soldiers. What was the reason? This is the reason. Jesus in

spite of his meekness did not inherit the earth, so that you who are not meek shall inherit it. Jesus in spite of being pure in heart did not see God so that you who are not pure in heart can see God. Jesus in spite of being merciful did not receive mercy so that you who are not merciful shall obtain mercy. In Jesus not only all the sufferings that we ourselves are supposed to suffer he bore, but including all the goodness he performed we enjoyed. This is how Jesus fulfilled the law of Moses in his life that transformed us into his likeness, freed to love and called to serve. This means that when God looks at you God sees someone who is as responsible and free as the person who does the sermon on the mount everyday. As a great hymn runs, "To see the law by Christ fulfilled and hear his pardoning voice, transforms a slave into a child and duty into a choice."