

SEPT 30/OCT 1, 2017

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. The first son in today's Gospel said he would do his father's bidding, but did not. The second balked at first, but then repented and did as he was asked. What service is God calling me to do? What son am I more like?
2. Jesus said to the religious leaders in his audience that even sinners would get to the kingdom of heaven before they would. How can this be possible? It is perhaps that Jesus saw through them and their duplicitous ways? God is never fooled by our outward behavior, our willingness to be agreeable when we have no intention of going along. Are there times when we pay "lip service" to the Gospel but have no intention of opening our hearts to it? When we know we should take seriously the teachings of the Church but refuse because our minds are already made up?

OR Saint Augustine, a doctor of the Church, once wrote that the first, second, and third most important attitude in Christianity is humility. In today's second reading, Saint Paul is concerned with how we conduct ourselves in our community of faith. He urges us to let our conduct be worthy of the Gospel we say that we believe; and that it all begins with humility. He asks us to consider others better than ourselves, and to serve them by looking out for their best interest, not ours. Consider how Saint Paul's appeal to imitating Christ's humility can enhance your relationships.

3. ***"When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did."*** A preacher gave his congregation a simple rule to live a good and happy life. He said, "Turn right and go straight." Implicit in that simple truth is the need for each person to make a free will decision to choose to do right rather than wrong, to do good rather than evil. Jesus tells a parable that calls us to discern God's will and make a free will decision to choose to do God's will even if it is inconvenient, unpleasant or risky. The father told one son to go to work in the vineyard, and he said "No!" but had a change of heart and went. The second son said "Yes sir!" but did not go. Jesus teaches us that our first response to God's will for us may be "No!", but our final response to God must be "Yes." Doing God's will may not be easy; it can be challenging. For many Catholics and Christians around the world today, it involves losing all worldly possessions and is a matter of life and death. But to be true disciples of Jesus we have no choice but to "Turn right and go straight." and say "Yes!" to God.

OR ***"Which of the two did his father's will?"*** This is a parable that every parent should be able to cite and recite at a moment's notice -frequently. It captures the true meaning of the difference between honesty and dishonesty, good and evil, right and wrong. There are a few of us who have agreed or promised to do something and then failed to do so. Sometimes we forget. Sometimes we get overwhelmed by other events or emergencies and cannot make the time to do what we promised. But sometimes we commit to do something and have no intention to fulfill that commitment. And then there are the occasions when we refuse to do something, then reconsider and do what we have been asked. Jesus knew that when we truly open ourselves to God in prayer we may hear Him ask us to do something we are not willing to do. But when we are being good stewards of our prayer and continue to be open to God's will for us, we will do God's will regardless of the challenge or consequences. It is then that we are honest, good and righteous.

OCTOBER 7/8, 2017

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. In today's Gospel, the owner of the vineyard sent messengers to collect his share of the harvest from the tenant farmers, but there was not a single good steward on the property! God is the owner, we are the tenants. What sort of stewards are we?
2. In today's parable, Jesus uses the gift of the vineyard as an image for the bountiful gifts that have been bestowed upon his followers. Jesus also makes clear the responsibilities of the Christian steward, to take gifts that have been given and to be "productive" and "fruitful." St. Paul gives us some indication about how to proceed to that end and enjoy the peace of Christ as a result: to strive to grow in holiness by being more prayerful, by being truthful and honorable, by doing justice to others, by striving to have a pure heart, by being gracious towards others, and by committing ourselves to excellence in whatever we do. As good stewards of the Lord's abundant gifts, what can we do this week in our own lives to grow in holiness?

OR Today's Gospel reading poses some challenging stewardship questions. When Christ returns, we will be found working diligently in the Lord's "vineyard;" converting our own hearts into a rich harvest of love and compassion? Calling those outside our vineyard to enter into the joy of the Lord? Or will we just be living, taking advantage of what the Lord has given us, but not doing our part in return? Jesus' parable suggests that if we aren't good stewards of the gifts we've been given then the gifts will be taken away, and we will be called to give an account for our failures. We have all we need for a bountiful harvest. What will our Lord find when He returns?

3. ***"He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times."*** After telling a parable about tenants of a vineyard who killed the servants and the son that the landowner had sent to collect his fair share of the crop, Jesus asks what the landowner should do to the tenants. Before we approve of the disciple's response, we should consider: Does the vineyard represent the world? Do the tenants represent us, who have been given a share in God's world to be productive for the Lord? Do the servants represent the patriarchs and prophets that God repeatedly sent to the Israelites to remind them to love God and their neighbor? Does the owner's son represent Jesus who came to teach us how to love God and our neighbor; to love our enemies; to love one another as He loved us? Are we being productive with what God gave to each of us? Are we returning to God His fair share by sharing with others? Now, do we still want to "put those wretched men to a wretched death?"

OR ***"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit."*** A wise employer who paid above average wages and provided very good benefits would tell all of his new hires, and remind his existing employees, "If you do your job you get to keep it." He treated his employees like family and they learned they could come to him with problems and concerns, and he would help if he was able. "Say what you mean and do what you say" was another of his many expressions. He expected his employees to do their job and be honest with him, with each other and with the customers, and to treat each other as family. This wise employer knew that Jesus was teaching the chief priest and elders of his day, and us today, that God our Father and the Creator of His Kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" has given each of us a vast array of talents, abilities and gifts that He expects us to use for our own benefit and to share with others. If we fail or refuse to do so, He will take his Kingdom from us and give it to "people that will produce its fruits."

OCTOBER 14/15, 2017

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. In today's second reading, St. Paul thanks the Philippians for being willing to share in his hardships and promises that God, in turn, will fully supply all their needs. Our God truly cannot be outdone in generosity!
2. The prophet, Isaiah, offers us an image of the feast the Lord has prepared for us: rich food and refreshment. Jesus tells us that many are called to the Father's "heavenly banquet table," invited to this celebration as if it were a "wedding feast." But because of the manner in which this invitation is treated or avoided, few are chosen to participate. How have we treated the Lord's invitation to participate in the banquet? What have we done this week to prepare ourselves for this rich feast?

OR There are certain Bible verses Christian stewards have memorized. One of them is Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians found in today's second reading – "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (4:13). Most people define themselves either by their problems or their possibilities. Fearful people wake up each morning ensnared by their problems. Christian stewards wake up reflecting on their possibilities with confidence and hope. Some stewardship reflection questions for the week: What challenges do you back away from because you doubt that you are up to them? What would you attempt tomorrow if you were sure God would help you?

3. ***"Jesus again spoke to the chief priest and elders of the people in parables . . ."*** Jesus told many parables. They were stories, not necessarily based on fact, but that communicated an important truth. Jesus used parables to get the attention of the people and to make them think. Jesus even used parables to teach truth to the "chief priest and elders of the people." And apparently, they listened to him. He tells them about a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. The servants that were sent to the "invited guest" are mistreated and killed. The king fills the feast with people ordinarily thought unworthy. God invites us to a great feast - the wonderful world he has created for us. Unfortunately we can create our own small world filled with our own self-centered interest and ignore the opportunity to share with others in God's world and the joy of growing in our relationship with God. The chief priest understood that Jesus was challenging them to be better. Do we understand he is challenging us as well?

OR ***"Then the king said to his servants, 'The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.'"*** The Gospel passage for today and the past several Sundays have been parables that Jesus used to create images to teach his disciples and challenge the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes. Jesus used parables because of all of them, including Jesus himself, the scribes were, by definition, the ones who could read and write. Some parables, such as today's Gospel, had rather harsh sounding messages. Many parables were about the consequences we face if we do not understand and acknowledge God as the source of all that we have and fail to be all that God created us to be. The parable in today's Gospel is addressed to the leaders and elders of Jesus' day. They may or may not have been able to read and write, but they were intelligent enough to understand that Jesus was challenging them to be responsible leaders and elders. Do we understand Jesus is challenging us to be all that God created us to be?

OCTOBER 21/22, 2017

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. Each year at tax time, we conscientiously give “to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” Does my stewardship indicate that I am faithful about giving “to God what belongs to God?”
2. The Pharisees and the Herodians tried to trick Jesus into either speaking heretically against Jewish law or seditiously against Roman law. He would have none of it. “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that belong to God!” Jesus said. So, for those aspiring to be disciples of Jesus Christ, the stewardship question is: What portion of what we hold belongs to God? The deeper stewardship question is: What on earth does NOT belong to God?

OR In today’s Gospel we hear proclaimed a profound teaching by Jesus on stewardship. What belongs to Caesar? What belongs to God? Christian stewards recognize that everything they have belongs to God. God created them, and God has claims of every part of their existence. They also realize that the sovereign is an institution whose nature and purpose is to promote the common good and protect the welfare of its citizenry. As long as it accomplishes the mission while treating every single person with deep respect, justice and compassion, it merits the steward’s support and cooperation. Christian stewards know what belongs to the Lord, and they are better citizens when they live their lives according to His Gospel.

3. **“Whose image is this and whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar’s”.** The image or name of emperors and kings was often embossed on the coins minted during their reign, both out of vanity (some even proclaimed themselves gods) and as a demonstration of dominance. During the life of Jesus, the coins of the Roman Empire bore the image of Caesar. People living under Roman rule, either by choice or conquest, depended on Caesar for protection and commerce. Jesus recognizes the trap the Pharisees laid for him. They understood his response: To the extent that you depend on Caesar as the source of your life and existence, then “repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” But, if you recognize and accept that you are made in the image and likeness of God; and acknowledge God as the source of all that you are, all that you have, and all that you ever will be, then “repay to God what belongs to God.” Who is our God? Whom do we recognize as the source of all that we are? How do we repay Him?

OR **“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”** Parents and care givers who send a child off to college or to a different city to live on their own may observe that their child gradually becomes aware of who fed, clean, clothed and housed them in their infant years; who sacrificed so much time, personal interest and resources to provide them with an education and opportunities to grow and mature. It may not be until that child has a child of their own that they fully appreciate all their parents or care givers did for them and how much they owe them, and possibly express gratitude. Are we aware of God’s gifts to us and do we try to use them to the best of our ability for ourselves and others? Do we understand our obligation to thank God for his generosity? If we never become aware of God’s gifts to us, and fail to use them, we may have to depend on Caesar [the state]. Then we may understand the wisdom of Jesus, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” It may be helpful to remember that without God there would be no Caesar [the state].

OCTOBER 28/29, 2017

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1. We fulfill the commandment to love our neighbor when we exercise good stewardship – joyfully sharing our gifts of life, abilities, and resources to meet our neighbor’s need.
2. To whom in our personal lives can we say we have or wish to love with all our hearts, all our souls and all our minds? Could that person be a spouse, child, parent, best friend, long-time companion? Jesus commands his listeners to love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, and minds. We are called to be good stewards of our human relationships, but what about our relationship with the Lord? Do we try to cultivate and nurture that relationship as frequently, as deeply, and as intimately as we do with those we profess to love the most? Are we willing to commit the time and the energy to be good stewards of our relationship with the Lord? If so, what can we do to nurture that relationship? If not, why not?

OR There is one word or command that summarizes today’s Gospel – love. For Jesus, there is no distinction between these two commands of loving God and neighbor. One naturally flows from the other. In fact, for Jesus, these commands constitute a way of life for Christian stewards; a unique approach to life and to their relationship with others. Our neighbors include everyone with whom we come into contact: family members, friends, people we don’t like, strangers, and particularly those most in need of our love and compassion. Love is always for doing well and helping others grow closer to the Lord. What are ways in which we might do better at following Christ’s love command?

3. ***“The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.”*** The story is told of the man who went to Rabbi Shamai and asked if he could recite all of the law and the prophets of Israel while standing on one foot. Rabbi Shamai said it was impossible. So the man went to Rabbi Hillel and asked him the same question. Rabbi Hillel lifted one foot and said, “What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to them.” Then he put his foot down. Jesus reflects Hillel in the Golden Rule [Matthew 7:12] and reminds his questioners and us of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Both Hillel and Jesus knew that their questioners were looking for a way out, a way around the law, a loophole. But there is none. In fact, Jesus ups the ante. He commands us to love our enemies. And just before he goes out to be brutally tortured and crucified, he says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” When we see Jesus face to face, what will we have to say to Him about how well we have done?

OR ***“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*** During the life of Jesus Rabbi Shamai and Rabbi Hillel [the uncle of Gamaliel, who taught Paul] led two schools to study the Torah in Jerusalem. A man approached Shamai and asked if he could recite all of the laws and the prophets of Israel while standing on one foot. He said it could not be done. The man then went to Hillel, who raised one foot and said “What you would not want someone to do to you, do not do to them” and then put his foot down. He added, “All the rest is commentary.” The Pharisees and Sadducees sent a scholar of the law to challenge Jesus with the same question. Jesus, cites Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and adds that “The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandment.” Jesus is saying, “All the rest is commentary.” Imagine a world in which everyone loves God with their whole mind, heart, soul and strength; and loves their neighbor as themselves. Obviously, we cannot do it by ourselves. But if we do not do it ourselves, it cannot happen. So let it begin with us.