

September 27, 2020 11:30 a.m. Cathedral Crowley Center

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In many ways, it feels like September just began, but here we are almost at the end of the month; summer is over, and on this beautiful Sunday morning, we are enjoying the first weekend of Fall. We come together here this morning as People of Faith---people trying our very best to live a “virtuous life”--- placing our Faith in God Who is Loving and Merciful. And today’s Readings, which we’ve just heard for this 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, echo that message, which gives us Hope, but which also poses some challenging questions, which only each of us can answer for ourselves.

As People of Faith, our most important responsibility is to live our lives according to what God asks us to do. I use the word “asks”, but as we all realize, the more accurate word is “commands”. God has given all humanity basic “commands”, better known as the Ten Commandments, which outline what it means for us to live in communion with God and in peace and harmony with one another, which is God’s ultimate Plan.

When Jesus came into the world, He summed up those 10 Commandments, and all the other previous commandments of the Law, into one great commandment, with two parts: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

And so, one of the challenging questions today’s Readings pose for us is: how are we doing in regard to living our lives according to God’s Plan, and in communion with God’s Will? Or another way to ask that question is: are we living a “virtuous life”?

One of the great blessings that we, as human beings, have is the gift of Free Will. We choose how to live; we are not pre-programmed. We choose what we do, and we choose what we will not do. Of course, the flip-side to that “free choice” is that we have to live with the consequences of those choices; and in terms of our relationship with God, we definitely have to give an accounting to God about the choices that we make.

In today’s First Reading, the Prophet Ezekiel challenged the universal excuse that we human beings have used since Adam and Eve, that “life isn’t fair”, and

even that “the Lord’s ways are not fair”. So, as Ezekiel posed the issue: if we freely choose to live a virtuous life, but at some point along the way, “change our mind” and “*turn away from virtue to commit iniquity*”, God will hold us accountable for that choice. On the other hand, if a person has been living “*a life of wickedness*”, but then, changes his mind and decides to do “*what is right and just*”, God will reward us for making that choice. That sounds not only fair even by our own standards, but generous as well, doesn’t it?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus dealt with the same issue but in a different way. Of course, Jesus never dictates, nor does He force anyone to accept His teaching. He appeals to our reason and to our heart, and He leaves it up to us to draw the correct conclusion. So, as He was speaking to the Chief Priests and Elders, He asked them: “*What is your opinion?*” Then He proceeded to tell them this simple, but very compelling, Parable about “two sons”. The father asks the first son to go into the vineyard to work; the son initially refuses, but then changes his mind and goes. Then the father goes to the other son with the same command/request; that son assures the father that he will go, but never does. And Jesus’ question is: “*Which of the two did his Father’s will?*”

When all is said and done, what is most important are not what plans we have for our lives, nor the good intentions of our lives, but rather the “choices” we make. Jesus was always trying to teach us, both in His Parables and through the example of His own Life, that God is not impressed with the “motions” of Faith that we might go through, or what “gift wrapping” we put on our actions. That’s why Jesus and the Scribes/Pharisees were in constant conflict. Those Religious Leaders focused on just “going through the motions”, and fulfilling the externals of the Law; but somewhere along the line, they had lost the spirit of the Law---they were missing the essence of what God’s Plan was. That’s also why Jesus made the final point about the public sinners---the tax collectors and prostitutes---because they “changed their minds”----they were humble enough to realize that their actions were sinful and they repented and changed their hearts; but the Chief Priests and Elders remained steadfast in their stubborn ways. Jesus constantly teaches that God pays attention to the “life choices” that we make, and that is what we are accountable for, whether we think that’s fair, or not.

So, how vibrant is our Faith? To what degree does our Faith guide our actions? Do we call on our Faith only in matters that we might consider “religious”, or do we allow our Faith to guide all our actions, in every aspect of our lives? For those of us here who are adults, we can assume that we are mature---physically,

mentally, emotionally, and psychologically. But what about spiritually; what about in terms of our Faith? Is our Faith “mature”---are we operating with an “adult Faith”? If we separate our Faith out from what we might call “our regular life”; if we have two sets of standards: one for what we do on Sundays; and the other for what we do the other 6 days of the week; if we are satisfied with doing the minimum in regard to our faith, and are all too eager to give ourselves a “pass” on striving for holiness in our lives----well, we might have our answer.

The best way to measure whether we adults are functioning with an “adult faith” is to look to Jesus. Jesus should always be our Model---the One with whom we compare ourselves. That’s exactly what St. Paul was telling us in today’s Second Reading when he said to the Philippians: *“Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus.”* We might say: Wow! That’s an incredible challenge; no one could ever measure up. But that’s why Jesus came into the world---to show us the way to live our lives; to provide for us the standards for us to follow. And we can do so, with the Grace of God, and if we consciously choose to do so by trying to have the same attitude that Jesus did. St. Paul goes on to explain that: *“even though Jesus was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God something to be grasped; rather, He emptied himself...becoming obedient to the point of death.”*

The spiritual process of “emptying ourselves” of anything that stands in the way of us following God’s Will is a sign of a “mature Faith”. Coming to realize that even as mature adults who make our own choices, we are always accountable to God; we never outgrow our need to be obedient to God’s commands. And we must always be humble enough to *“bend our knee and confess with our lips and our actions that Jesus Christ is the Lord of our lives”*.

So, it seems to me that there are 3 questions that we have to ask ourselves to gauge our spiritual-maturity: 1) Do we acknowledge the fact that God’s commands and Jesus’ teachings are what should be guiding our lives? 2) Are we making a serious attempt to live a Virtuous Life? 3) If we are not doing so well in that regard, are we at least wise enough, and humble enough, to “change our minds”, like the first son, and turn away from whatever is keeping us from living in union with God so that we can turn back toward God and God’s ways?

At the end of our lives, when we stand before God to give the final accounting of our Life choices, what God will ask is: Did you go into the vineyard, or did you

refuse to go? Did you live in the world according to My ways, or just your own ways?

What we celebrate in this Mass, and at every Mass, is the fact that our God is a God of Mercy and Compassion, Who never runs out of giving us “second chances”, and Who constantly offers us the grace “to change our minds”. When we choose to live our lives in that way, that will be the evidence of a mature, adult and strong Faith, rooted in Jesus Christ, our Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God bless you, now and always!