

10th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Do Not Hide from the Lord”

Fr. Frank Schuster

God calls out to Adam and Eve and they hide because they were ashamed. They didn't feel worthy. The reason why this moment in our first reading strikes me is because, from God's perspective what is more frustrating, that Adam and Eve were ashamed or that they hid when he called? You see, God called them by name, but a real sense of unworthiness prevented Adam and Eve from answering the call. And there seems to be a parallel to this in our Gospel reading when Jesus speaks of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. What is the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit? The sin against the Holy Spirit is when God calls us to himself and we refuse him. It is unforgivable because we are refusing the love and grace to be forgiven, follow?

I think what keeps a lot of Christians away from the healing Jesus offers us can be a false sense of unworthiness of a relationship with the Lord. Jesus calls us to himself and we don't answer because of shame. It is a tragedy. I mention this because this past few months I have had a number of people preface their confessions to me with, “I have been delaying confessing these sins because I am ashamed”. I am so glad they came to me so I could share with them how much God loves them. How much God loves us more than we love ourselves! I think that is perhaps how the devil wins more souls to himself than he should, by whispering into our ears telling us we are not worthy of God's love. And then, when God calls us to his presence, we hide. When God offers us his Holy Spirit, what a tragedy if we refuse!

There is a great book out there entitled “Saints Behaving Badly” by Thomas Craughwell. It is a great book that tells the rest of the story regarding the lives of the saints. One of the chapters tells the story of a man named Callixtus and it is a great story for those contemplating a vocation or for those who wonder about their worthiness. Just insert your favorite actors from the Pirates of the Caribbean and it would make for an entertaining movie. The scene is late second century to early third century. Callixtus was a slave to a man named Carporphorus, a Christian who set up a bank for fellow Christians and Early Church ministries during a time when Christianity was illegal. Because Carporphorus was impressed with Callixtus' accounting skills, Callixtus was soon in charge of this bank's investments. Callixtus however was not a very scrupulous person. With sticky fingers he purposefully mismanaged and embezzled the money for personal gain. And he was of course caught and his misdeeds were exposed. Since the early Church Christians were now very upset with him, not the least being his owner Carporphorus, Callixtus' solution to the huge mess he put himself in was to simply panic and run away. He fled as fast as he could to the ocean, jumped on board the first ship he saw because he didn't care where it went. Carporphorus of course followed after him, took the next boat and the chase scene ensues on the ocean. When Callixtus saw that Carporphorus' boat was catching up, legend has it he again panicked, jumped into the water and started swimming as fast as he could towards land. Carporphorus sent a row boat to have him fished out of the water, and Callixtus was finally caught and put in irons.

Once back in Rome, Carporphorus punished Callixtus by forcing him to operate a giant grist wheel day after day which was back breaking work, but a lot less severe than what could have happened to him. Callixtus eventually caught a break by agreeing to recover for the Christian community some of the lost money he mismanaged in return for being released from

hard labor. Once Callixtus was free of his shackles, in his zeal to get things right, he of course managed to get into huge trouble again. He ended up starting a huge riot in a local synagogue trying to recover funds invested with the local Jewish community. The riot was so bad, Callixtus got himself arrested by Roman guards and sent to Fuscianus, the prefect of Rome. Fuscianus settled the matter in the usually brutal Roman way and ordered Callixtus scourged and banished to hard labor in the mines of Sardinia. This was essentially a death sentence as few slaves ever return from these mines.

Enter the mistress of Emperor Commodus into our story, a woman named Marcia. In addition to being the Emperor's lover she was also a Christian. How that math works, your guess is as good as mine, however Marcia was also a very courageous woman and used her influence to free Christian slaves from the fate of dying in the mines. To this end, she secretly asked Pope Victor I to give her a list of Christians to be freed. Pope Victor I gave her a long list but of course purposefully omitted Callixtus. When Marcia's representative arrived to free the Christian slaves, Callixtus fell at his feet and begged to be set free too even though he was not on the list. His pleas were heard and soon he was back in Rome. Once back, Callixtus understood that he had a lot of work to do to make up for his misdeeds. Time passed and Pope Victor saw sincere repentance at work in Callixtus' heart. So much so, that he permitted Callixtus to assist a priest named Zephyrinus who assigned work for priests and deacons in Rome for the pope. Years later, when Pope Victor died, Zephyrinus was so well regarded that he was in turn elected Pope. And because Callixtus had finally learned in life how to be a good and loyal servant, one of Zephyrinus' first acts as pope was to ordain Callixtus a deacon and put him in charge of a Christian cemetery on the Appian Way (a place where you can still visit to this very day).

The following is a quote from the book I have been referencing, "By the time Pope Zephyrinus (who would later be canonized as well) died in 217, Callixtus had become so well respected that the clergy and Christian laity of Rome elected the former slave, brawler, and embezzler pope...Callixtus' brief five year reign was marked by the virtue he had come to appreciate above all others: mercy." I think we can all understand why "mercy" was at the heart of Callixtus' papacy. He favored such radical concepts as finding ways for adulterers and notorious sinners to be rehabilitated and re-welcomed into the Catholic Church. Imagine that. And he received much opposition for this point of view, however his position for forgiveness and mercy in the life of the Church eventually won the day. In fact, I think it is fair to say our present day understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can find roots pass through the papacy of Saint Callixtus.

There is a lot more to his story than I have time for in this homily. However, the reason why I share it with you is because the story of Saint Callixtus' vocation as a deacon and later as a pope had little to do with his personal sense of feeling worthy. Follow? His vocation wasn't about feeling worthy but rather about finally answering God's call in his life. Do you see the difference? His story isn't that different than the woman at the well in the Gospel of John, the good thief in the Gospel of Luke, or even St. Peter who knelt before the Lord and said, "Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man", remember that? Jesus' response to Peter was "Follow me. I make you a fisher of men." And Peter did just that. Peter felt unworthy too. The Lord called him anyway. Peter followed.

This dynamic in scripture makes me wonder. When we seek and live out our vocations in the life of the Church, perhaps the question of worthiness is not as important as being faithful to our calling. For instance, I can imagine a husband or wife wondering at times how worthy they or their spouse might be in that relationship (that happens sometimes) but nevertheless understand that regardless of how they are feeling that day they are nevertheless called to love each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Follow? It is the same for the religious life, for sisters, priest and deacons. There can be days when we wonder about our worthiness and would be well served to stay close to our spiritual directors and confessors as we work faithfully on these things. However, our ministry doesn't come from feeling "worthy", it comes from being called by the Lord to serve him in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.

My friends, in the moments when we feel naked before the Lord, in those moments when we are insecure or unsure, and even in moments when we feel unworthy and rightfully so, when the Lord calls our name, it is never in our best interest to hide in shame. It is better to turn our gaze to the face of Jesus, accept his grace and simply say, "Here I am Lord. I come to do your will".