

26th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Faith and Consequence”

Bishop Frank Schuster

It is good to be back from Rome. As many of you know, I spent the last two weeks at what is commonly referred to as “Baby Bishop School”. I spent the week with over 170 new bishops from around the world. It was a wonderful time getting to know other new bishops from around the world. The experience culminated with an audience with Pope Francis. He spent two hours with us in a conversational style meeting where any topic could be discussed and was discussed. When Pope Francis speaks of his desire for a synodal church, I can tell you that our Holy Father practices what he preaches. We prayed together, listened to each other, wrestled with the many challenges the Church faces today, and we turned our minds to Jesus the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep and calls us bishops to do the same. I am sure I will have opportunities to share more about this pilgrimage as the year progresses. However, I just wanted to let you know this weekend that the Holy Father’s heart is first and foremost interested in your personal faith journey as a parishioner of a local parish than whatever is happening politically or otherwise in our Church or world. He reminded us that as bishops the supreme law of the Church is the care of souls. With faith comes our salvation. However, faith also has consequences in how we conduct ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ.

That message could not be clearer on the wall of the Sistine Chapel where Pope’s are elected. As each cardinal casts their ballot they do so before Michelangelo’s famous depiction of the final judgment. In a whirlwind of motion, you have souls being swooped up into heaven on Jesus right side and souls being hurled down into hell on his left. Indeed, when cardinals cast their ballot for the successor of Peter, they do so with a clear reminder that faith has consequences.

Of course, no one ever wants to dwell on thoughts of hell. However, when Gospel readings like we have this weekend come along, it provides us an important reminder. It is clear from our Lord that faith must look like something. Faith looks like following the commandments, living the beatitudes, and loving God and our neighbor. And so, the parable Jesus gives us today is very unsettling. It challenges to think about why this rich man ended up in eternal torment. And so, let’s take a closer look.

First off, the rich man is not named in the story. The bible doesn’t give him a name and when the bible doesn’t give a name, this means this character was meant for any of us to identify with, just like John’s woman at the well, the man born blind, etc. Because the rich man is not named, Jesus is therefore inviting us to identify with him for a moment. Jesus does so for medicinal reasons because it challenges us to ask ourselves, what was this man’s sin? What did the rich man do other than to live his life with the resources that were his to spend? When he spent his money on clothes, wasn’t there a tailor who got paid who then was able to feed his family? When he spent money on food, wasn’t there servants in the kitchen and merchants in the marketplace who benefited as well? Jesus himself spent some considerable time with wealthy people, so much so that he was criticized for it, and so we can rightfully conclude that being wealthy wasn’t this

man's sin. So, what did this man in the story do to deserve hell? What is the medicine Jesus is trying to give us here?

Here is my take. For those of you who went to Catholic school or read the catechism, you may remember that the Church distinguishes between sins of commission and sins of omission. Remember that? The rich man's sin was that he was so self-absorbed in his own life that he did not care to even notice poor Lazarus suffering at his doorstep. That was his sin. It was a sin of omission, and a glaring one at that. When Lazarus died for lack of love and compassion, the rich man didn't notice what happened to Lazarus, but God noticed. God noticed. The point of our Gospel reading today is, although all our religious disciplines and practices are important and necessary, we must really watch out for sins of omission, sins demonstrating the failure to act. After all our necessary pious observances, we miss the whole point of these practices if we fail to love our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable around us.

That is what seems to be missing in our world more and more, I think. Love for God and love for neighbor is being replaced with indifference for God and indifference for neighbor. We sometimes care more for what is going on in our handheld screens than what is going on in the beating hearts of the people around us. We can ask ourselves the question this week, who are the Lazarus' in my life right now? Who are the people I am failing to notice that simply need a kind word from me or a simple acknowledgement that I recognize their existence? Or, in the Holy Father's terminology, who am I called to be a missionary disciple to, someone who takes the faith we have been given outside these doors and lives it by accompanying those who live on the periphery. They could be a neighbor, they could even be a family member, they could be someone at work or the school you attend, who are the Lazarus' in your life right now?

The nature of free will is that God will not force us to love him and the people around us, we must choose that. We must choose to be loving of the people around us; even when we are confronted with an increasingly indifferent world. This weekend, we also celebrate our parish's patron St. Vincent de Paul. His life exemplified what it looks like to care for those who are most in need. Our we individually living up to his expectations? My friends, when we choose to be more loving and recognize the face of Jesus in the people around us, like St. Vincent de Paul we discover that heaven doesn't have to be that far away from this world if we choose to act in the here and now. Heaven is not that far away if we as disciples of Jesus bring heaven to earth, through one relationship at a time and one act of kindness at a time, through Christ our Lord. Amen.