

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time “What is Authority”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Little Johnny’s baby brother was baptized in church one Sunday. After the liturgy was over, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. He sobbed, sobbed, and sobbed. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, “That priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys!” I love that joke. And, it is applicable to our Gospel reading today, believe it or not. Stay with me.

In last week's Gospel, Jesus summarized the six hundred and thirteen commandments of the Law with one beautiful word, "Love". This week, Jesus criticizes religious leaders who are so caught up in externals, so addicted to praise and titles, that they forgot the central message they were on to proclaim with their lives. I think this Gospel reading serves as a good examination of conscience for anyone who is in a position of leadership in the community or at home. However, as we pray with what Jesus is saying, I think we also get an insight of what Jesus means more concretely of how best to love God and love our neighbor. Jesus gives us a deeper insight into what it means to be a Christian.

The first critique Jesus offers for someone in leadership, be it a pastor, employer, coach, teacher or parent, big brother, or sister, is the crime of putting heavy burdens on people and then not lifting a finger to help them carry the load. We have all encountered someone at some point who has done this, and it is always frustrating. The wisdom Jesus is suggesting here is that we should be slow to criticize anyone unless we are willing to walk with that person and help carry the burden. If we care enough to say something critical to someone, we should care enough to be willing to help them. The word “compassion” means literally “to suffer with”. And so, we can ask ourselves this week, who are the people in our lives that we have been critical with and ask ourselves, “How can I better walk with this person, helping them in the areas where they are struggling?” If we work on having greater compassion for people we are frustrated with, our capacity to love is increased in the exchange.

The second critique that is good for anyone in authority, again be it a pastor, employer, teacher, coach or parent, older sibling, is to be humble and authentic. Jesus is disgusted with people whose works are performed solely to be seen by others. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love to sit in places of honor. And I think we can all remember a situation when we encountered someone like that. Thankfully, all of us can remember people with authority in our lives who are authentic, secure in their being, who are not addicted to the praise of others, and do not get addicted to power over others. They walk humbly, love greatly, and have a deep authenticity and integrity. Jesus is telling us if we want to be a leader, we should be more like that.

The third critique Jesus gives to people in authority is to not become addicted to titles. Now, Jesus is not opposed to titles of father, mother, rabbi, etc. Why? We have seen him use these titles before throughout all the Gospels. The rhetorical technique Jesus is employing here is called hyperbole. What Jesus is saying here is, whatever title you have right now, do not get addicted to it. Do not be addicted to your title of "mother" or "father" or "doctor" or whatever. In seminary, I was intrigued to learn that Gospel authority has nothing to do with titles. When Jesus came, people noticed that Jesus taught with authority not like the scribes and Pharisees. "Authority" in Greek is "*exousia*". *Exousia* means literally "out of our being." True authority therefore does not come from titles. Authority comes from our being. For example, I think most of us priests are very conscious that when a priest is appointed pastor of a parish, he has got the title to be sure. They may even call him "Father". But if the priest does not have "*exousia*", if he doesn't lead and love his people out of his very being, he is pastor in title only. The same thing goes for bishops. This is a helpful reminder to me personally because I know I am far from perfect. We would be remiss, however, to think that Jesus' critique is just for ministers.

When a couple has a child, they may gain the title mom and dad, but if they do not love their child *exousia*, from their being, they may be mom or dad in title only. In fact, we have all read stories, or seen on talk shows on television, times when to call this or that person a father or mother can be rather insulting to the child. Being a father or mother in our faith tradition is more than what the DNA test says. Parents become mothers and fathers when they love their children *exousia*, from their being, and act responsibly, giving a good example, and make the necessary sacrifices because of that love. I know couples that have adopted kids who are truly the mothers and fathers of those kids in every way that matters in the eyes of God.

My friends, I think it is a safe bet that most of us here embrace the title "Christian". However, following Jesus' logic in our Gospel reading today, having the title "Christian" is meaningless unless our identity as a Christian is *exousia*, from our very being. If we believe that from the waters of baptism our very nature is transformed and configured to Christ, this reality should be authentically reflected by the measure we love God and love our neighbor. This is an interesting challenge the Gospel presents to us, are we Christian in name only or are we Christian "*exousia*", from our very being?

The Catholic answer immemorial of course is "we are working on it". And Jesus demonstrated by his life, death, and resurrection that he is most willing to walk with us. In the Eucharist, Jesus gives us his very flesh and blood, to transform our nature into his. As St. Paul challenges us in the second reading, the word of God works in those who believe. This week we are invited to consider how authentically Christian we are. Do our actions measure up to our identity? Do our actions speak louder than our words? My friends, this week we are invited grow deeper in our identity as Christians by the measure our lives truly follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.