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There used to be a billboard on Interstate 70 that said: “Don’t make me come down there!” It was signed, “God.” That just might sum up the first reading and Gospel we hear this week.

This is a four aces Sunday for everybody who thrives on criticizing the hierarchy and clergy. Malachi lambasts corrupt priests, and Jesus is on a roll as he goes after the hypocritical religious leaders of his day. That can make us, the people in the pews, feel nice and comfy until we remember that the Gospel is designed to call us to conversion, not reinforce our self-righteousness.

Remember how at the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus told Peter that he was going to be led where he didn’t want to go? Squirring Peter responded by pointing to the beloved disciple and asking “What about him?” Jesus answered, “What concern is it of yours? You follow me.” If we take that advice we’ll look to what these readings call us to do and pray that others do the same.

Today’s Gospel brings us into the core of Jesus’ moral teaching. What Jesus demands of the people of the covenant is integrity, being who you say you are, making all your behavior an expression of your beliefs, no matter the cost.

It was Jesus' integrity that allowed him to heal on the Sabbath; he knew that God's will was for the well-being of people, no matter the cult restrictions. Integrity led Jesus to the cross because his life meant nothing if he weren't faithful to his Father. Integrity means that you have learned what life means and you live your life like you mean it.

What made Jesus both popular and frightening was that he never stopped talking about the real meaning of life. "You are worth more than many sparrows," "Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul," "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" the law and the prophets.

Jesus censured the scribes and Pharisees because they said all the right words while they used their position to their own advantage, wasting little concern on God's people. They loved to expound on God's law, but were adroit at avoiding its requirements in their personal life. They could tell others what they should do, but did nothing to help them accomplish it. Displaying their religious regalia and making public displays of their piety, they had fallen into a trap of seeking attention and admiration rather than cultivating a relationship with God.

Their teaching was empty. That was bad for them, but worse, it endangered the vitality of the word of God. Hypocritical preaching is far more grievous than no preaching at all. It is destructive, which is another way of saying that it's diabolical.

So, back to us in the pews. What did Jesus want the ordinary folk in his audience to hear when he went after the scribes and Pharisees? He made one thing crystal clear: "Do not follow their example." He went on to tell them, call no one your teacher, father or master, but look for the ones who serve. They are the ones showing the way to God.

There are many kinds of service today, but one we may be short on is the service of being willing to talk about the core questions of life. Polite people have been taught to avoid conversations about religion and politics because some people don't want to be confrontational. Talk about your football team, the weather, even the hierarchy, but don't risk being offensive by saying what you really believe is right or meaningful. Keep your integrity hidden under a bushel basket.

A couple of years ago columnist David Brooks lamented that public discourse has become "undermoralized and overpoliticized." He said, "We have many shows where people argue about fiscal policy but not so many on how to find a vocation or

how to measure the worth of your life” (*The New York Times*, May 15, 2015). If we want to avoid the superficiality Jesus criticized, we will begin to engage in meaningful discussions. The clergy are not the only ones called to proclaim the word, we are all baptized to be a priestly, prophetic people.

The billboard message made a point, but also missed a point. God has come down here and has given us the mission to make that obvious in word and deed.

### **MALACHI 1:14b—2:2b, 8-10**

Malachi is the last of the “Twelve Prophets.” We know almost nothing about the person who supposedly authored this book. The name, Malachi, which means angel or messenger, wasn’t even a proper name at the time of the book’s composition around 450 B.C.E. But if Malachi is obscure, the prophetic message of his book is perennial. This short work aims at persuading the people to observe their covenant obligations day by day, in both worship and the moral life. It focuses particularly on the priests who have failed in their responsibility to provide solid teaching and example to the people.

The selection we hear today comes from God’s dispute with those priests. The core problem is that they have accepted shabby sacrifices for their own benefit. That’s a sacrilege. Our selection delicately edits out part of God’s response to their irreverence. We hear God say “your blessing I will ... curse.” Our reading skips God’s most graphic expression of anger: “I will spread dung on your faces.” That’s no small show of disgust at how unfit the priests have become.

Malachi is calling people to integrity in worship. Whether speaking of the priests or the people, he says God demands that we remember the covenant. The call to conversion comes in the middle of the reading where God tells the people to listen, to keep their covenant and the word of God close to their heart. When their heart becomes disengaged, their blessings are empty, they void the covenant of Levi, and their offerings are contemptible.

The last line, “Why do we break faith with one another?” reminds us that love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably linked. If we are true to God, we will be true to one another. This reading calls us to integrity of worship and life. It calls us to continue to live the covenant God instituted so long ago, bringing it to the fulfillment demanded by our own moment in history.

## **1 THESSALONIANS 2:7b-9, 13**

Paul's description of his evangelizing activity among the Thessalonians is the antithesis of the ministry of the corrupt priests described in Malachi and the religious leaders Jesus denounces in Matthew's Gospel. Whereas those two readings berate the religious leaders who are anything but pastors to their people, Paul describes his relationship to the community at Thessalonica in familial terms that go far deeper than the relationship of pastor to sheep.

The introductory phrase, "We were gentle among you," has generated much scholarly controversy because a number of manuscripts say "We were infants" among you. While there is some similarity in tone, the word "gentle" implies that the apostles have been restrained; they were unimposing and held back their power. The idea that they were as infants puts all the power in different hands. As infants, the apostles would have been willingly vulnerable. A discussion of the difference between the two ideas and their implications could be very fruitful for any parochial team or ministry preparation class. (See Stanley E. Porter and his text *The Apostle Paul, His Life, Thought, and Letters* for further information.)

The next phrase Paul uses should astound us. Paul compares himself and his fellow evangelizers to a nursing mother. The Hebrew Scriptures occasionally used the mother metaphor to describe God. Perhaps the citation most directly related to Paul's imagery is Isaiah 49: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast ... the child she has borne?" (v. 15 NIV). This was quite likely in Paul's mind when he wrote those words to his community.

Paul went on to say that he and his companions were determined to share not just the Gospel of God, but their very selves. We can hear in this message shades of what Paul writes to the Corinthians and the Romans when he talks about being one body in Christ. For Paul, sharing the Gospel is not just sharing information or dogma. In the Hebrew tradition, sharing prayer was a deeper experience than sharing a creed. When people prayed together they stood in solidarity before God. They understood that they were making an immense commitment when they addressed God as *our* Father. Unlike our recitation of the creed in which each person says "I believe," praying in the first person plural takes us beyond an individual relationship with God and recognizes that we were created to be in community and ultimately in full union with God. But even that depth of relationship falls short of Paul's message.

In order to grasp the depth of what Paul is saying, we need to return to his two phrases: we were “as a nursing mother” and “we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves.” There is no human relationship in which one gives as much as a nursing mother gives of her very self to her child.

Paul wants the Thessalonians to comprehend that his evangelizing work among them has been a source of life for them all. Pope Francis says much the same in *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”): “When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment. For ‘here we discover a profound law of reality: that life is attained and matures in the measure that it is offered up in order to give life to others. This is certainly what mission means.’” (EG, 10)

In that selection, Francis makes explicit what was implicit in Paul. It is not just pastors or full-time ministers who are called to give their very selves to the work of evangelization. Francis tells us that sharing our faith, sharing what gives our lives meaning, is the source of all genuine personal fulfillment. We are all called to be like nursing mothers with one another.

## **MATTHEW 23:1-12**

When Jesus talked about morality he didn’t mince words. One word that could summarize his teaching on the moral life might be “integrity.” As we search the Gospels we have to look hard to find Jesus talking much about sexuality. When he met sinners of any ilk, he offered them forgiveness and told them to change their ways. He rarely quoted the law except to comment on its deeper meaning. (See the Sermon on the Mount) But what really seemed to get Jesus going was hypocrisy, especially on the part of people with power or position. We might say that he critiqued them unmercifully, except that his prophetic critique was another expression of the mercy that called them to conversion. As is to be expected, the authorities he lambasted were the ones who became his bitterest enemies. Nobody likes to be unmasked as a phony.

We need to interpret the selection we hear today from Matthew in the light of its circumstances. At this point in the story, we’re hearing about a growing life and death conflict. Jesus had silenced his opposition — at least in public. They resorted to plotting in private, a decision that exposed them as the fearful bullies they were.

The problem that set Jesus off on this tirade was that the scribes and Pharisees were saying the right things for the wrong purpose. They had legitimate authority but they used it destructively. They wielded the letter of the law like a hatchet that severed the simple people's hope for righteousness and cut their sense of being close to a loving God. In Jesus' eyes, that took away all the legitimacy of their leadership. It didn't destroy the teaching they quoted, only their authority to represent it.

It's easy to imagine that Jesus' tirade had been building up for a long time. He had watched as the self-proclaimed orthodox orated, caring far more about their precision and eloquence than about the needs of those whom they addressed. He had seen them parade in their oh-so-obvious religious garb, focusing public attention on their fine facade, while their hearts were hidden — perhaps even from themselves. They might have spoken God's word accurately, but they perverted it in their attitudes and actions.

Jesus expressed his own theology clearly. "Call no one on earth your Father, you have but one Father in heaven." And what was God, his Father, like? As the representative, the revelation of God's greatness, Jesus taught "the greatest among you must be your servant." Jesus did not call himself God, but he taught that greatness expresses itself in humble service, a lifestyle he modeled.

When he preached and even more when he interacted with people, Jesus presented a model of God like that found in Isaiah 49 where God is described as even more loving than a nursing mother. In verse 16, God says: "See, upon the palms of my hands I have engraved you." That engraving was the mark of slaves whose master's name was tattooed or scarred onto their hands.

That shows how far God goes in dedication to humanity. The God Jesus reveals is great enough to be able to give everything. Anyone who wants to be God-like must start with integrity and humble service.

## **Planning: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Lawrence Mick

Did today's first reading and Gospel make you squirm just a little bit? They did that to me. If you didn't have a similar reaction, you might want to read them again

prayerfully.

Both readings challenge the religious leadership of their time, pointing out how often they proclaimed expectations of others that they did not fulfill themselves.

Chastising the priests of Israel, God says, “You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction; you have made void the covenant.” In the Gospel, Jesus warns us not to imitate the Pharisees “for they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen.”

Elsewhere, Jesus called the Pharisees “hypocrites.” That suggests a conscious decision to exempt oneself from the expectations imposed on others. I suspect few of us really do that. Our problem may be subtler. We expect everyone in the assembly to sing the musical parts of the liturgy, but we may find ourselves too occupied with other details to sing ourselves. Or, we urge the people to internalize the prayers we say, but we find it difficult to keep our own attention focused on the petitions or the collects or the eucharistic prayer. We might call it an occupational hazard — we get so involved in making sure the liturgy is celebrated well that we may forget to pray and celebrate ourselves.

Sometimes, this happens because we have not prepared well enough. Details that should be settled before the liturgy suddenly need attention during our worship. But often, we find ourselves distracted from praying and celebrating simply because we focus too much on whether everything is going well. It takes a conscious effort to remind ourselves that our primary reason for being present is to pray and worship God together with the rest of the assembly.

Of course, this issue affects many more people than liturgy planners. Choir members and musicians, lectors and eucharistic ministers, ushers and servers can all allow the demands of their role to interfere with their own worship. Planners could help all liturgical ministers by encouraging them to remember their primary identity as members of the assembly.

Do all the ministers in the opening procession who are not carrying the cross or a candle or the Book of the Gospels have hymnals so that they can participate in the opening song? Are servers trained to take part in all the responses and songs, at least when they are not carrying out a specific task? If we want the whole assembly

to take an active part, the example set by liturgical ministers (who are often quite visible to the assembly) is important

## **Prayers: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Today's readings are about abuse of power among those who profess to teach or lead others. These roles are especially open to scrutiny because of the power inherent in them. We could extend this idea to anyone in a position of authority, but our focus here is on the faith community. Those in leadership roles in the church are reminded of their responsibility, and we are encouraged to hold them accountable and to pray for them. We are all called to be responsible in one way or another.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you warned your disciples against burdening others: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you called them to be humble servants: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you challenge us to be responsible people: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** My friends, let us pray now for all of us, who are called to live responsibly.

**Minister** For those in leadership in the church, may they serve in integrity and humility ... we pray,

- For all civic and political leaders, especially those responsible for peace and justice ... we pray,
- For those overwhelmed by the demands and responsibilities of pastoral leadership ... we pray,
- For the awareness that teachers and leaders are human beings with strengths and limitations ... we pray,
- For those discerning roles of leadership and service within the church ... we pray,
- For those who have been wounded by pastoral leaders, especially in situations of sexual abuse ... we pray,



- For our veterans and all who have generously served our country ... we pray,
- For those in need among us, especially the sick, the dying, and those who have died ... we pray,

**Presider** Loving God, we depend on others to teach and lead us in faith. For them, we are grateful. Grant integrity and humility to all who are called to these ministries, and forgive those who use their influence inappropriately. We pray in the name of Jesus, that you will continue to call holy people into service. Amen.

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