

"Practice What You Preach"

Homily of November 3, 2002

by Fr. Jim McGee

Religious leaders don't come off too well in our First and our Gospel readings today, do they? The past three weeks, Jesus has been chastising the elders of the community and the chief priests; and today in our Gospel story, he takes on the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Scribes. Why these tirades over the past several weeks in these sections of Matthew's Gospel that we have heard over the past month? Why? Because the elders, the leaders, of the community, do not practice what they preach.

In our present day, I'm sure there are many of us here, including myself, who having heard these two readings (the First from the prophet Malachi, and now from Jesus' word in the Gospel of Matthew) we can't help but think of our situation, our own religious leaders, when we hear the accusation that applies to us today. We, as a Church, and our religious leaders, proclaim or promulgate strict laws and teaching on sexual morality, and then find out that some religious leaders are acting more like wolves than like shepherds, and then compounding that, cover up the scandal. But the challenge of Jesus is not merely for the religious leaders, the people who hold positions of power in our institution. Any time that Matthew speaks and talks about the Kingdom of God and the Church, he is putting that challenge to all, all its members. Matthew, Jesus does that because of our fundamental belief that we are all teachers, we are all leaders. In our Baptism, we adopt the priesthood, the prophetic mission, the kingship, the leadership of Christ. We manifest God's presence in the world by the way we practice what we preach.

So all of us Christians, not just our religious leaders, or government leaders, our corporate leaders, whether we are leaders in our home situations, perhaps leaders in our social relationships among friends - we are at different times leaders, wise persons, to one another. Whether it's leaders in our committees, our culture, we Christians are leaders in the way we live our faith.

Perhaps when you heard the story today from the Gospel and from the prophet Malachi, you immediately thought, also as I did, of our corporate leaders -their greed, their deceit, egregiously violating the law. Or we may think of those who are not violating the law, but are cleverly manipulating the law - the tax codes, the financial regulations - claiming that they are merely complying with the law, and that if they should be stricter or be changed in any way, we should go about changing them and getting our Congress to do so. There's one problem with that solution, however, that's offered by the people whom we are challenging. It seems they forget that these days, almost the only way that we can change the laws is by the use of the vast financial wealth that they control.

Hypocrisy can be found everywhere - in our religious institutions, among our leaders, in our corporate institutions and organizations, in our governments; and, probably, we've had experiences when we were children, of pointing out the hypocrisy of our parents. And, perhaps now, if we're parents or grandparents or guardians in some way, we're told when we come up a little short.

Jesus is appealing to the conversion of hearts, the only thing that will sustain ethical behavior, the only thing that will sustain us in difficult times. The issue about practicing what we preach in our organizations, in our family organizations, corporate, government, religious, the issue is not about ethics, which is our first impulse. I want to suggest that it's about spirituality. It's about our relationship with God. It's about our motivations - what drives us to be faithful to the values of God that we hold dear in any circumstance. The values of compassion, the values of justice, the values of not using violent ways to resolve resolutions, whether it be physical or verbal violence that we're tempted to use. Asking ourselves each day, reminding ourselves about just what is our primary value in life - our relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Spirit, is the key to sustaining ourselves.

This week, as I was reflecting on the scriptures, a classic story or secular parable came to mind. You may have heard some variation of this story through the many years in all kinds of various formats. As is true with any good family story, any good community parable, any good urban myth - the details may change, but the punch line is the same. The story still remains truthful to us in many ways. I'm sure you've experienced that in your own families. You know, when you're talking about a family relative and maybe describing how short they were, and the person was actually about 5'6", and year after year they're down to about 4'9" - all those little details that are changed to make the story have a little more of a punch.

So I'd like to share this story with you - my version of that story. And so, once upon a time, an army major was in his brand new office, when a private appeared at the door. Well, to impress the private, after they exchanged their salute to one another, he invited him to have a seat in the office, but said to him, "You know, I'll be right with you, but I just have to finish this call." So he picks the phone receiver up off the desk (he didn't have a cell phone) and you hear him say, "Well, yes, General, I'm so glad you called. Uh-huh. Sure, sure. I can take care of that. Sure. I will call the Pentagon, I will do it in the hour, and will get right back to you." And then he hung up the phone. And then, of course, he turned to the private, to give him his attention, and said to him, "Well, now, soldier, what can I do for you?" And, the private, who was staring nervously down at the floor, without looking up, the private says in a low voice, "Well, the sergeant told me to come in and hook up your telephone." (Laughter!)

I thought of this parable, this classic parable and I reflected on the Scriptures, because I

think it explains for many of us anyway, what may be the reason for our motivations that lead to inconsistency in what we practice with what we preach. I think we're often governed in our culture by our image. Our personal image. And some of us will do everything to maintain the image we want to present to the world. We want to maintain an image that often our family or our culture has dictated to us, what we are and who we are and who we should be. But we Christians believe that who we are, are images and likenesses of God, from the very get-go. We are more than just good when we are just true to ourselves. I'd like to suggest that perhaps one way of cultivating our motivations to be people of integrity in any kind of situation is to remind ourselves every single day of that fundamental belief of our creed, of our doctrine, that you and I are made in the image and likeness of God. We don't become the image and likeness of God by our good works; we are already from our birth, image and likeness of God.

If we would remind ourselves each day of that truth, perhaps remind ourselves of that truth before we make any decisions, whether regarding our family or friendships, our relationships, or with co-workers in our organizations. If we remind ourselves of that, even with a computer screen that says, I am made in the image and likeness of God, whatever you do to bring that forth to you, I guarantee that you will see actions, decisions, flowing out of who you really are. If we remind ourselves of that fundamental truth, I guarantee that justice, integrity, compassion, concern with others and a world greater than ourselves, will truly reign.

Our leadership as parents, as heads of committees, as elders, as friends caring for one another, as leaders of Church and government and the corporate world will truly begin to be one of service.

If that image doesn't quite work for you, I'd like to suggest a second one. I need it because I'm not a fundamentalist scripture person, so I can never exact quotes, or give you the right verse. I do know it's from Psalm 131. I think the Church, in pairing this letter to Paul to the people of the Church in Thessalonica does a wonderful service from tailspinning into self-condemnation, from pairing the second reading to the first reading from the Gospel. When Paul reminds folks about their wonderful affection as a community, and his disciples (his co-workers, I should say), their great affection for the community of Thessalonica, and he uses the image of the mother nursing a child. So God's relationship is with us. But I'd like to give you an image that I have found very powerful in my life, which is a Psalm, the actual Psalm that goes with the readings today. It's Psalm 131 and I think it gives us a wonderful image that if we would steep ourselves in, may help us to truly remain people of integrity in difficult circumstances. It's Psalm 131, and it's verse 2:

I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me.

To meditate, reflect, contemplate on that image in your prayer, either of being the child who is finished nursing at his or her mother's breast, and now rests comfortably on the lap and in the arms of his or her mother, that is our relationship with God, always. If you need to flip the picture and image yourself as being the mother, the leader in that circumstance, nursing this child to satisfy hunger and bring peace and rest, either of those images I think will do wonders for us in reminding us of our goodness, of the goodness of our world, of the commitment of God to us, and our commitment to be leaders of service, people of integrity, people of the Kingdom of God.