

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

This Gospel – a condemnation of religious leaders for their self-interest, cluelessness about the way most people live, vanity, pomp, and greed – is tough to talk about because I have to consider that I may be among the people Jesus is condemning. But I want to follow that lead, because there's something we can learn here that may be vital not only for us but for our society and for the coming generations.

It's no secret that lots of people – maybe your friends, siblings, children – maybe you – have become disillusioned with the church over the seemingly endless scandals or over any number of other issues. Many have walked away, and you may sometimes think of doing the same thing. (Trust me, I have...) Especially for people closer to the church's day-to-day operating, the risk of disappointment by its leadership is considerable. (When I hire someone to work in our parish who's never worked for a church before, the last piece of job-orientation advice I give him or her is this: "Don't lose your faith" – and I mean it; there will be no shortage of opportunities.)

Sometimes I look at the quality of care that's shown me and to other people in a store, or a hospital, and I'm amazed that they're often so much better at welcome and service and follow-up than we are. But I also know that, like churches, the people "on the ground" are often great while what's "up top" – not the nurse but the health-care industry as a whole, not the sales clerk but the business sector of our economy, not the classroom teacher and aide but the central administrative offices, not the mail-carrier but certainly the higher levels of government – all of these are pretty much as bad at fulfilling their missions as the church is at fulfilling its. The people at the top are a mix everywhere, and the system at the top is often broken and self-serving – as they are in the church.

But there's one thing that keeps me committed to our church, and I can illustrate it by an oddity in today's reading: Did you notice, "Call no man on earth your father?" Isn't it weird that we – the church throughout the world – totally ignore something that it would be so simple to set right? Why call priests "father" when Jesus forbids it?! (I know some of the history of how the church got that way, but the point remains: We contradict daily what Jesus was very clear about.) Yet we keep reading this Gospel, and so many others like it that put us to shame because we don't live by them. Why don't we just quietly ignore these passages?

This is crucial to me: Unlike just about every other institution I can think of – schools, business, government, healthcare – the church makes it a point to condemn our present, inadequate level of performance, publicly and loudly and ceremoniously and often. We read this Gospel, with honor and ceremony, even though it condemns what we do. To some that might seem just hypocrisy; but I see a spark of promise in it. Here's why.

Most of us know that our society and culture are in big trouble, and quite possibly headed for disaster. If you have children or grandchildren and aren't afraid of what sort of life they'll have here in a few decades, you're not paying attention. From popular movements like Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party, lots of people are convinced that something is rotten at the foundations of the way we live. And there's good evidence that it's right to be worried. In a report released just this past Thursday, ranking 31 advanced countries on issues of social justice, such as -

- Overall poverty prevention
- Poverty rates for children, for seniors, and overall

- Income inequality
- Pre-primary education investments
- Health-care inclusiveness, quality, and equity -

- Our country came in at number 5 – from the bottom. (Just above Greece, Chile, Mexico, and Turkey; but below Portugal, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, and 22 others above them.) This is the country we’re now living in – and what direction do you think things are now heading in terms of justice, fairness, and care for people in need?¹

This is where I take heart from today’s Gospel passage, and from the Gospel as a whole, and even from a very, very imperfect church. In addition to the issue of personal salvation there is the contribution that the Gospel’s teachings and way of life could make to turning around the way we live with one another – and to the effect those teachings and that way of life could have on our society, benefiting even nonbelievers. But only if they’re not forgotten. Would not lives of service to the community; a widespread commitment to equality (greater if not absolute); care for human dignity in every person; and the rest of what the Gospel teaches make for a better society and culture for us and for the generations to come?

For all its faults – and I know them better, I suspect, than you – the church is the carrier of the Gospel, a message that just might help our society to find a better path than the one it’s now on. The church does that not because it succeeds in living according to the Gospel, despite Jesus’ demand that it do so. But despite its continuing failure it remembers, reads, and celebrates the Gospel, criticizing itself and its leadership publicly Sunday after Sunday, so that it might, with God’s grace, improve. What other institution is willing to be self-critical this way? Where is there a comparable message of the need for lives of service, a comparable condemnation of self-interest, a comparable message of care for the most needy?

I stay with the church despite its leaders – not condemning them, because judgment belongs to God and I’m probably not doing any better than any run-of-the-mill pastor or bishop in God’s eyes. I stay with the church because it is the only, the unique bearer of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, his power, his teaching, and his way of life. This is the contribution that I – that we – can make to our society, to your children and grandchildren whether they believe or not, and to the future. We can ensure that the Gospel is not forgotten, that it is occasionally listened to, perhaps is even, rarely, put into practice; and that a self-critical carrier of the word of life continues to be present in the desolation around us.

¹ Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation, “Social Justice in the OECD – How Do the Member States Compare?” Cited in *NY Times*, 29 October 2011.