

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Nov 5th 2017

The greatest among you must be your servant. Matthew 23:11

In today's gospel, Jesus urges us not to be like the scribes and Pharisees because they aren't sincere in their lives. "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." Jesus is telling his followers that the religious leaders of his day worked hard to follow rules and look devout. Their faith was practiced for show, with longer prayer tassels than others and making their phylacteries – the prayer boxes they wore – easier for people to notice. Their pious rituals earned them places of honor at banquets and synagogues, and public greetings in other places.

But while the religious leaders preened and looked holy and otherworldly, they didn't bother to connect with their people. Pharisees were strict about rules when work could be done and how laws were enforced, but their hearts held no compassion for those who struggled. They relished their lives of privilege and it blinded them to the suffering of others.

Am I relieved when I read this gospel? I don't wear tassels and other public signs of our piety today so do I think I am off the hook? Or is there an echo of another Pharisee in Luke 18 who prays, "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous..."

When we stop and really open our hearts to Jesus, we can recognize once again that we are far from perfect. But the good news for us is that Jesus is not looking for perfection in us but humility and service. Jesus reminds us that we are brothers and sisters, part of the human family. He urges us to be compassionate and not to let our lives get sidetracked by the external rewards offered by our society.

Jesus invites all of us, even the greatest among us, to be a servant. We may chafe at the idea of being a servant. I don't want to be lowly and I want to be in control in a way a servant is not. But what if we alter the way we think about the kind of service Jesus is calling us to? As we consider being a servant, we change the meaning to love.

I am a servant to my husband: I serve my husband by loving him better.

Parents are called to serve their children – to love them.

Many of us are servants for/loving – our elderly parents.

In my life today, I am no longer raising children, but I am serving/loving my husband each day as much as I can. And I have grandchildren to care for, and my adult children to love in new ways.

When I am at my best, Jesus is at the center of my life and service, and any activity I am involved in, is about serving. I still listen as people share their suffering with me and I grieve for those around the world whose lives are so filled with pain.

Our goal is to be a servant for those who suffer, sharing this pain with Jesus. It is that awareness of others and the compassion I pray for that counteracts what Pope Francis calls the globalization of

indifference.

The first reading from Malachi echoes the gospel with the same challenges to the religious leaders who had grown lazy in their duties. Soon the people followed their example. Malachi reproaches: they “have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter” by their instruction. “Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us?”

Loving God, today I pray to ignore the question that is so often in my heart: “What about ME?” I beg you to help open my heart to hear the needs of others in my family, my life and this world. Help me to forget myself and lose myself in service/love. Then I will truly know that my life is in your hands. Then I will feel as loved and protected as a “weaned child on its mother’s lap.”

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