

Fr. Michael Sparough Homily: Help. I'm a sinner. I can't do it by myself. (MT 23:1-12)

Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,  
"The scribes and the Pharisees  
have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.  
Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you,  
but do not follow their example.  
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.  
They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels.  
They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues,  
greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.'  
As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.'  
You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.  
Call no one on earth your father;  
you have but one Father in heaven.  
Do not be called 'Master';  
you have but one master, the Christ.  
The greatest among you must be your servant.  
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled;  
but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Homily: *Help. I'm a sinner. I can't do it by myself.*

Jesus' opening words in today's gospel are instructive to us, aren't they? "The Scribes and the Pharisees have taken their place on the chair of Moses, therefore, observe and do what they tell you. They're in positions of authority, so listen to what they have to say. Legitimate authority has its place." But then Jesus issues this warning which he details in the rest of today's gospel, "They preach but they don't practice, listen to what they say, follow legitimate authority, but don't follow their example."

That gap between public figures, leaders, who say one thing and do another was as rampant in Jesus' time as it is rampant in our own. Just a few of the many examples that come to mind that have been in the news lately:

- A pro-life politician who urged people to vote pro-life and to protect life, but when he got his girlfriend pregnant, it came out that he urged her to get an abortion.
- Harvey Weinstein the Hollywood mogul—through courageous women coming forward the open and dirty secret of Hollywood, the casting couch, has finally been exposed.
- The Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly paying out millions of dollars because of accusations of sexual abuse coming against him by courageous.
- The head of NPR, National Public Radio, resigning for inappropriate sexual misconduct.
- The clergy sex abuse scandal that continues to plague the Catholic Church.

Fr. Michael Sparough Homily: Help. I'm a sinner. I can't do it by myself. (MT 23:1-12)

- One of the most popular religious leaders of our time, Joel O'Steen, defending his failure to open up his church to the victims of hurricane Harvey, saying, "No one asked me."

The gap between what we say, and what we preach, and what we practice, continues to widen. These are just a few of the many examples--and I'm sure you can think of lots—and it's discouraging. It's discouraging isn't it when people who are held in prominence, who have positions of authority—whether that's in the church, whether that's in business, whether that's in government, whether that's in law, whether that's in police—and we recognize, they don't practice what they preach. The inevitable tendency is to say, "Hmm?" But Jesus makes the distinction, a critical distinction here, as he says that their authority is legitimate, listen to their words but don't follow their example. That's very difficult to do because we give in. We become angry, we become resentful. Or, we look at them and somehow, we judge ourselves better and I think to do that is to miss the point because we're all hypocrites.

Hypocrites comes from a Greek word and it has to do with the Greek actors who wore masks to change characters. I love this example from history because I have a background in theater and so the Greeks wore masks to change characters, but also to amplify their voices. They didn't have any modern amplification and so wearing the mask was a way of projecting their voice. But they wore a mask and so the word hypocrite comes from that Greek word literally to mean a mask or to be two-faced. Let's acknowledge that is all of us. It's just that when you're in a position of prominence your own hypocrisy is more exposed.

The 12-step program is based on acknowledging, "I'm not the person I want to be. I'm Michael I'm a workaholic." It's so similar to what's the truth at every Mass: "I'm Michael and I'm a sinner." We stand at the beginning of every Mass—we stand at the beginning of every 12-step meeting—and we say, "I'm not the person I want to be but by God's grace I'm making progress, not perfection. By God's grace, I have the goal in mind and I'm not giving into discouragement. By God's grace, I'm not letting my sin define me. By God's grace, I'm not letting my addiction define me. Jesus says, "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Let's stand in that place and acknowledge we're not yet the people we want to be. We can't heal the sin, says the prophet Jeremiah, by denying that it's there. And so that first step in a 12-step program is get it out there and scream, "Help! I can't do it by myself." At the beginning of every mass we scream out, "Help! I can't do it by myself."

The 12-step program is essentially a spiritual program of recovery. It's so easy to see the flaw in our sister or brother's eye rather than the plank in our own. As I mentioned, I have a background in theater and a number of years ago I was working on a screenplay and I showed it to some professional writers and they were very complementary of that screenplay. Right after that meeting, I went to a monastery for a couple of days of prayer and as I was praying, I started practicing my speech for the Academy Awards. I was going into church to pray with the monks and my mind was drifting and there I am in my tuxedo—Or do I wear my clerics? I'm not exactly sure—and then I sort of tuned in...you know how that happens? You drift away and then you tune in. I tuned in and the Psalm that we were praying was the Psalm from today's Mass, Psalm 131: *Oh Lord, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty. I busy myself not with great things nor with things too sublime.* And I said, Oh Lord, have mercy, have mercy, have mercy.

Fr. Michael Sparough Homily: Help. I'm a sinner. I can't do it by myself. (MT 23:1-12)

My dad was an alcoholic. My mother abused alcohol. When my dad drank too much he became very angry. When my mom drank too much, she became sloppy and sentimental; gushy, emotional. I used to get so angry at both of them but Al-Anon and the 12-step program of adult children of alcoholics—and other 12-step programs—have been so helpful in my own life in terms of dealing with the alcoholism that has been so rampant in my family. It is not just from my parents, but from their friends, from aunts and uncles. I have a long line of alcoholism within my family. The text that was so helpful to me was today's gospel of Jesus saying, "Call no one on Earth your father, you have one father in Heaven." Jesus isn't literally saying don't call your dad, your dad. Don't call your mom, your mom. Don't call a priest father. That's not His point. His point is, go deeper. As long as I thought of my dad as the guy who was my hero, and my dad do a lot of things really well: he was a public figure, and he was a business leader, and he was a civic leader, and he was a religious leader. When I put him up on that pedestal, and then I was aware of his own weaknesses, I got so angry and frustrated and discouraged. But one day this passage from Matthew's Gospel where Jesus says, "Don't call anybody on earth your father. Don't call them Rabbi. Don't call them teachers. Don't call them the Messiah. You've got one teacher. You've got one father, your father in Heaven. And that sank in. I realized that my dad was just like me. He was more like a brother to me. Jesus says, "You're all brothers. You're all sisters." We're all in this together. Isn't that the wisdom of the 12-step program? Isn't that the wisdom of beginning a Mass by acknowledging our weakness to say we're all in this together.

Somehow when I did that and I said, "Yeah, my dad is just struggling. My mom is just struggling, just like me." I was able to forgive them. I took them off the pedestal. I was standing beside them. "Yeah these are the people that brought me into life, that gave me life. These are the people that taught me but they are struggling. They're more like my brothers and sisters because I have one person who created me; one person who can love me unconditionally; one person who isn't a hypocrite; one person who practices what they preach consistently across the board." Boy, when I stepped into that place, that was a place of great freedom. That's when the transformation began to work in me from the inside out.

Great wisdom in today's readings. But of course, when we name a spade, a spade, don't expect that we're going to be honored for that. We're going to be persecuted. Nobody likes to have their faults pointed out. We have to be very careful and very circumspect and we have to expect that we're going to pay a price for naming truth to power. And to resist that hypocrisy nonviolently. And as Jesus, to take that suffering to our self, not debasing ourselves but willing to offer that suffering, to unite that suffering for transformation. To name truth, but to stand grounded in our own weakness.

One of the things I love about the 12-step program is the adage, *Progress, not perfection*. One day at a time; continuing to work the program throughout our lives. Isn't that what we're here today to do? To come before God and ask for the help that we can't give ourselves? We find in our midst as fellow addicts, as fellow 12-steppers, as fellow sinners, gathered together to say Christ is in our midst. The spirit is among us. Amen. (Amen.)