

The 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time September 27, 2020

White supremacists, and human traffickers are entering the Kingdom of God before you. Pro-abortion politicians, drug-dealers, and terrorists are entering Heaven ahead of you. Fascists, holocaust deniers, and polluters are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of you.

These words - as harsh as they sound - give us some idea of how Jesus' words to the chief priests and elders must have sounded to them. "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you." It must have shocked and offended them just as my words may have shocked and offended many of you.

Why would Jesus speak so harshly? If there was anything that aroused Jesus' anger it was self-righteousness. And He saw much self-righteousness in the religious leaders of His day.

Self-righteous people think they have everything figured out. They believe that by following all the rules and doing all the right things, they can earn their way to salvation and Heaven. But their religion, their faith, is all an outward show. There is little compassion and empathy in their hearts. They look down on other people who believe and act differently than they do. All their energy goes into making themselves look good rather than in helping others. Religion is a way for them to prop up their self-esteem rather than a way to serve God.

Of course, you don't have to be religious to be self-righteous. Atheists and other non-religious people often outdo Christians and other people of faith in their self-righteousness. Just look at all the protesters and their supporters. They are quick to look down on those who think differently than they do and work actively to keep people of faith from having a say in public life. Like self-righteous religious people, they can be quick to judge, condemn, and even persecute others.

Why does self-righteousness make Jesus so angry? Because it is a denial of the goodness and mercy of our Heavenly Father. If I can save myself by following the rules then why do I need a Savior? Also, self-righteous people measure their goodness by their good works and outward performances of piety. But, the real measure of our goodness is that we are made in the image and likeness of God and that we are loved unconditionally by Him. The self-righteous person cannot receive God's love as a gift because they are too busy trying to earn it. Finally, self-righteous people look down on others rather than treating them as brothers and sisters. This is probably what angers Jesus the most.

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If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably recognize some aspect of self-righteousness in ourselves as well.

Thankfully, Saint Paul gives us the cure for self-righteousness in today's second reading. "Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus."

The Son of God did not become man so that He could show how good and holy He was. Rather, He came as a humble servant. He lived among the poor. He called sinners and ate with them. He did not come so much to dictate commandments from on high but to show how great the Father's love is by suffering the cruelest of deaths between two thieves.

If we want to be truly like Jesus, then we must imitate Him in His humility and willingness to serve others in love. We must imitate Him in taking the last place. We must imitate Him in seeking the good of others before our own. We must imitate Him in "humbly regarding others as superior to ourselves." Ultimately, it means being willing to take up the cross every day and follow Jesus no matter the cost. If we are not willing to do that, then we can never hope to be righteous.

In one of his first interviews after becoming Pope, Pope Francis was asked to describe himself. He said, "I am a sinner. This is the most accurate description. It is not a figure of speech.... I am a sinner."

The first step to overcoming self-righteousness in our hearts is making that simple admission - "I am a sinner." Recognizing that we have turned aside from God's love and that we cannot find our way back allows us to put our hand in God's hand and trust Him to lead us home. It means learning to rely on Him rather than relying on ourselves.

Realizing that we are sinners also means that we begin to see others as brothers and sisters. We begin to measure our goodness not by how much better we are than they are but by how much we love them and how willing we are to serve them. Like Jesus, we begin to act with mercy toward others rather than with judgment and condemnation. Once we abandon our rigid ideas and look at others as people to love rather than as problems to solve, we can act with more tenderness and compassion.

Something else will happen to us as well. We will begin to radiate the joy of the gospel. And that joy will draw more people to Christ and to His Church than any moral arguments we could come up.

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The tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus' day were entering the Kingdom of God before the chief priests and elders because they believed and repented. If we want to join them in that Kingdom we too must believe and repent. We are sinners and so repentance is a daily exercise of measuring our attitudes against the attitudes of Jesus. But if we can stand humbly before Jesus in the truth of who we are, we will be transformed into His image and likeness. Then the goodness and mercy of God can shine through us to others.