

The 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time October 4, 2020

There was a priest I lived with while I was in college, I knew that he drank but I never knew how much until later. But one story goes, one evening after he was done with all his appointments, he went up to his room with a bottle of scotch as usual. After he had about three drinks, the phone rang. It was a parishioner whose mother was dying. She begged him to come to the hospital to give her the Anointing of the Sick.

Now, Father Mark knew that he was in no condition to drive. But he didn't see how he could refuse a dying woman. Also, there was no way he would be able to find another priest to cover for him in such short notice. So, he decided that he had to take his chances and drive to the hospital.

Thankfully, he got there safely and was able to anoint the dying woman and spend some time consoling the family. On the way back to the rectory, however, he was pulled over by a policeman who noticed that he was driving with his lights off. It didn't take long for the policeman to realize that Father Mark was drunk and he was arrested for driving under the influence.

The whole incident was an embarrassment to him and the parish but it was just what he needed to realize he had a problem and to get help. But, the fortress soon became a prison, isolating him from others, especially from God. It took the shock of being arrested and having his problems exposed that made him able to welcome God into that prison he built and lead him out into freedom.

In today's gospel, Jesus uses a parable to show the religious leaders of their day that they were using their authority not to serve others but to create their own fortress where they could protect their power. Like the tenants in the vineyard, they were not acknowledging that their power came from God in the first place. They were not even letting God into the fortress they had built and, because of that, they would soon lose everything.

Like Fr. Mark, like the tenants in Jesus' parable, and like the religious authorities of Jesus' day, all of us have little fortresses that we create for ourselves - fortresses where we make ourselves masters.

For some people, it is their free time. When they are done with all their obligations for the day, they will use their free time whatever way they see fit. No one - not their spouses, not their children, not even God - will tell them what they can do with it.

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For others, their fortress is their money. As they see it, they earned their money and so it belongs only to them. They will spend it in whatever way they see fit and no one can tell them otherwise.

Still others are like Fr. Mark and have addictions that take up all their energies. It is a fortress they can escape to and hide away from all the problems and the tensions of their lives.

But, as Fr. Mark soon discovered, those fortresses we build for ourselves soon become prisons. They isolate us from others and keep us from living full and meaningful lives.

The only way to freedom is to let Jesus in. He does not want to take anything away from us. He does not want to punish us or add on to the burden of guilt and shame we are already bearing. Rather, He wants to lead us to a more fulfilling life. He wants to show us that there is a better way to live than by hiding away in fear. He wants to show us that the pain we are trying to soothe with unhealthy behaviors can be healed through His love. All it takes is for us to admit that we are trapped, that we are prisoners of our own unhealthy choices, and to open the door to Jesus and His saving power.

One way or another we will have to leave these fortresses we have built for ourselves behind. We can leave freely by opening the door, letting Jesus in, and walking out with Him into freedom. Or we can barricade ourselves in until the walls crumble in on us. Let us reach out to Jesus today. Let us ask Him to show us the places which we have created prisons for ourselves, and let us ask Him for the courage to walk out with Him into freedom.