

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Philippians 2:1-11; and Matthew 21:28-32

In the fourth century, some Christian men and women moved to the deserts to focus on God. These desert mothers and fathers often spoke about struggling with demons, by which they meant the interior attractions that moved them away from God. How applicable their insights remain today! They illuminate the multitude of subtle ways these demons tempt us. We can be oblivious to our peril.

All three readings this Sunday call us to awareness of the work of these demons and the disciplined work we must do to move closer to God. Ezekiel 18 is a lecture by God for those who think that their suffering in exile is punishment for the sins of earlier generations. God counters with a list of sins the present generation still commits. An underlying premise of this chapter is that what we do causes what happens to us. While this is not always the case, we frequently approach God as if it were and demand equity. This accounting method, however, is a spiritual trap. It distracts us from our goal, righteous living to express our love for God. We must own our sins. "Not as bad as so-and-so" is not an adequate yardstick. Verses 31-32, which we do not read at mass, contain God's longing for us to shift from accounting-style spirituality to deep desire for life: "Cast away from you all the transgressions you have committed against me. Get yourself a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn then and live."

Can we stop the blame game and honestly name our own wrongdoing and how it gets us in trouble? So many forms of entertainment today cultivate in us brutality and selfishness. So many buying practices and business practices fertilize self-centeredness. So many attitudes about politics dehumanize others and glorify control. Lying harms the soul; so does bald criticism. I am not advocating over-scrupulosity, but rather a healthy, daily examination of conscience and a commitment to agape/love.

In the gospel, we are invited into the growing tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. He has entered Jerusalem and cleared the Temple. He is verbally dueling with those who disagree with him and winning handily. Today's parable is part of a series in which he proclaims that the authority and privilege the religious leaders have created for themselves is based on a lie. They have not actually answered God's call to do good in the world, although they say they do and everyone thinks they do. Here is the spiritual trap for all of us, the demon of smugness. Looking like a good Catholic is not enough, even if that involves big donations of time or money, attending mass regularly or knowing three nuns and two priests personally. Why not? Because it often masks a relationship with God on *our* terms. We only volunteer when it is convenient or become generous after we have made a mint for ourselves. We do good *after* we have done what we want. Jesus asks us to examine the quality of our "yes" to God.

We have Phil 2 to teach us what true commitment looks like: "Do nothing out of selfishness or vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for their own interests, but also for those of others." All of Western society yells back, "Absolutely not! If you don't love yourself, you can't love anyone else. If you don't look out for yourself, no one will." Paul responds by holding up Jesus as the best example of one who willingly allowed himself to be humbled and humiliated, resulting in glory. True to itself, humility is often about small things. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a cloistered nun living in an obscure place, asked to be assigned to work with the grouchiest nun so she could be kind to her. Thérèse said nothing every day when the sister who ran the kitchen gave her the worst food, simply because the nun did not like her. She bore the suffering of tuberculosis that would kill her while still a young woman. Thérèse saw her actions as little crosses united to the great cross of Christ. Spiritual glory can only come through such crosses. We like to pretend there is another way and we lose ourselves in avoiding pain and placing ourselves first. Blessedly, not only is Christ our example, he carries our crosses with us. For there is indeed encouragement in Christ, solace in love, participation in the Spirit and bountiful compassion and mercy for all who wish to turn and live.

- ❖ What holds you back from being humble? Take whatever it is to prayer.
- ❖ What can you do to approach politics with humility?