

Deacon Dan's homily for Sunday, February 16, 2020

"Just Okay is not Okay"

There is a series of AT&T commercials on TV now that has the tag line "Just Okay is not Okay." I'm sure you've seen them; there's the one with the Dutch translator who gets the translation all wrong and has clients hugging one another; the one with the boy band that doesn't dance surprising the audience; and the one with surgeon about to do surgery on a patient, who's "just okay."

Well, the big lesson for this weekend's readings is Jesus teaches us, "Just okay, is not okay." He says, "Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect." He doesn't say be pretty good...He says to be perfect! He doesn't just raise the spiritual bar; he raises it to the extreme.

The first reading from the Book of Sirach, a writing known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus, not Ecclesiastes, that's another Wisdom book. Its name means Church Book. It comes from the genre of the Bible known as the Wisdom literature. It was written to help the people maintain the religious faith; what today we frequently refer to as our Path to Holiness. This excerpt speaks of our ability to choose from among good and evil, life and death. The line that precedes the reading we heard says, "God, in the beginning, created human beings and made them subject to their own free choice" that is free will.

And the choices we make based on our free will are known to God, for he knows our heart, our intent...both good and evil.

Okay, so with this foundation, we are presented with the Gospel. To set the scene a bit, this text is from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus has already symbolically established himself as the new Moses. He climbed the mountain and brings the people a new teaching. Jesus spoke to the people, saying, "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ... But I say to you."

Can you imagine how radical this must have been for them to hear this? Moses told you such and such, but, I am telling you this! Jesus was saying to them, I am the new Moses for you to listen to, to believe, to follow. And, he was not belittling or undermining the old Law, the Law of Moses that was their religious foundation, but He was raising it up, giving it a new intensity, fulfilling it. As He said, “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.”

From its origin, when God gave to Moses the 10 Commandments, the Law was intended to bring humanity into alignment with divinity. Jesus’ Incarnation, His becoming a human person, one of us, that loving act of God, finally brought humanity and divinity together, into alignment.

That, “bringing it into alignment” is inviting us to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. To do this, to cooperate with the gifts of grace, we must get at the root of the sin that distances us from God. That is, before the act of sin, whatever sin may be the one that tempts us, we must root out the thought of sin.

Before one steals another’s goods, we covet, thinks about, desires to have another’s goods. Before one commits a hurtful or hateful act to another person, we think evil about that person. The act of sin begins with a compromise of the soul.

Jesus set a new standard for loving, and that is to not only eliminate cruel and hateful action but to also eliminate cruel and hateful thoughts, even hateful attitudes. The underlying problem, the disorder of sin has to be corrected.

Emmanuel Kant wrote, “Never treat another human being as a means, but only as an end.” John Paul II built upon this saying, “Human Beings should never be subordinated to be simple a means for somebody.” Isn’t this what pornography does? It turns a person into an object to a means for the viewer.

Jesus' teaching was to not just achieve conformity to the Law externally...the act, but alignment to God internally, in the heart and mind. And, the Church that Jesus founded, its mission, its job is to bring us to perfection; to make saints; Therefore, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, it is a radical mission.

Fellow parishioners pointed out something that emphasizes this to me a while ago, and we use it at every preBaptism class with parents and godparents. If you've had a chance to visit the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in downtown Sacramento and taken the time to walk up the left side, you may have seen the very large painting of 14 Saints of the Americas. Within these beautifully arranged portraits of saints such as Elizabeth Ann Seton, Kateri Tekakwitha, Katherine Drexel and Juan Diego is one empty frame. It is a reminder for us to see that that empty space is for our portrait, our saintly image; because we are intended to become saints.

Jesus isn't teaching to help people choose to be "mediocre Christians", the Church's mission isn't to form a "pretty good" Catholic people. Just okay, isn't okay. Therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

He wouldn't tell us to do this, if He didn't know that it is possible for us. It may seem extreme, an impossible path to holiness, but He accompanies us on this path. He gives us all we need to do this; to be a saintly people; to be a saintly person.

This extreme expectation of saintliness is complemented by God's extreme mercy and forgiveness. God, through His Church, the Sacrament of Baptism, Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick which [will take place in just a few minutes], [took place at the 5:30 Mass last night and this morning at the 11:00 Mass] offers complete forgiveness to the repentant sinner. This forgiveness resets, it heals, reconnects, renews our spiritual relationship with God. We can begin again, get back on that path leading to forever joy and become all that we are intended to be, a saintly person.

The choice is ours...free will. The gift of choice to choose light or darkness; perfection or just okay. Who would want to be a just okay dad, a just okay mom, a just okay student, a just okay Catholic believer in our Savior!

We choose holiness! We choose holiness!

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 76