

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For our purposes this morning, I was looking at our gospel reading assigned for today, and I was drawn initially to which word?

“All”

As in, “All the tax collectors and sinners...”

How many?

All.

And further...all were doing what? “Were coming near to listen to Jesus.”

Why?

Because he talks with them about God. Lives his life with and around them, in witness to God.

NOT because he tells them how, and to what extent, that they are NOT like God, or NOT liked by God, and certainly NOT how they are NOT loved by God.

In thinking of the Pharisees and the scribes referenced in our reading, I was reminded a gathering ...a diocesan clergy conference at Christ the King Retreat Center in Syracuse. Here we were, all colleagues...and, in prayer and in our mutual lives in ministry together, we are held up before God by virtue of a unique calling, if you will. Nothing elitist about that status is intended or even desired, and instead it is specifically rejected by the preferred alternative of being self sacrificial in the image of Christ. Finding and using the only power of Jesus...which is in the cross.

As a result, being ordained to the diaconate or priesthood is unique, we were reminded by the bishop. Our physical presence at these gatherings, unless excused, is mandatory, he said...and that is reflected in firm collegial nature of our mutual relationship with each other, and with God.

It is beneficial to see good friends, brothers and sisters in Christ....sharing notes, catching up on news, and so on. I spent considerable time sharing with a colleague priest, who will remain nameless even though he is no longer in this diocese. It was terrific to kibitz with him again...until...in referencing my secular work in the Family Court, he interrupted with a smile and a laugh that I was (quote) with the dregs and the scum in Rome (unquote). Nice.

Do you hear the parallel in the gospel? “And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”??? Does that touch you in the same way?

Looking further into these parables, the subject is underscored in what Jesus says and how he says it. Like the religious establishment, does he grumble? Talk about them as one would dregs and scum?

No, the message is about how God the Father rejoices. About more joy in heaven. About joy in the presence of the angels of God. Again, the focus is always about God. About heaven.

The conversation is NOT about how others do not measure up. Not how they are not good enough, not rich enough, not educated enough. It is NOT about how they worship using another book, or how they dress differently, or in any of the countless ways that we have all learned, all so well and so smoothly, to identify...in our own minds...how they are so different....translated into, how they are so inferior...to us.

It is always about God. What pleases God. How to “get to” God. And, while it might be more easily understandable in that spiritually centric culture, as opposed to what appears to be in our time and place where God is virtually absent from our collective cultural subconscious, it is always the same.

As human beings...by the very nature of our being, we are drawn to the divine...the same now, as it was then. Now...as then...is it any surprise that “all”...there’s that word again...all were following Jesus? I think that, generally, we mostly get the idea of these parables, but do not have the confidence or the experience to know the way to follow Jesus in having that conversation. It does not seem surprising that the message of (quote) let us have a burn the Koran day (unquote) goes in the wrong direction, in light of what we read in the gospel today...but, what do we do in place of that?

And, this time, the word that may pop out? Repent. Well, OK, but so what?

Notice the difference in the language and style of Jesus over the whole subject of “repentance”, as compared perhaps to our cultural and personal experience. We are probably more used to hearing the inner messages and seeing the images of the general themes of the Koran burning controversy: I have the Holy Bible in my hand, and you do not, and therefore I am right, and you are wrong...and, not only are you wrong, but damned to hell.

Jesus, on the other hand, fills his illustrations of God’s mercy and love to all by examples of the “others” in his society and time. The Samaritan...perhaps as cursed as the Romans in the eyes of the Jews of the day...in our most recognizable parable....hey, nice parallel to the dregs and scum of Rome, New York. Obviously, his messages, time and again, point out that, to God, this stuff means nothing...other than that it spiritually kills us instead, and leads us in a direction that we would rather not go. Instead, in our interactions with others, as well as ourselves, we need to continue to focus upon God...because we all sin. We all mess up. Each one of us cannot go through life outside of a hermit’s cave without bumping into someone else...having a hard conversation, cutting a raw deal, losing the chance that God gives us to individually extend ourselves to others in the ways and words of mercy and forgiveness. Here is an example.

I remember one Wednesday that was a very difficult court day for me...nine cases in the morning alone, with those (quote) dregs and scum in Rome (unquote). The day before was busy with client appointments and, for one Wednesday morning case, I had a client who did not keep her appointment.

Not only did she not keep it, but she did not call to cancel. Just did not show up...but, upon arriving on Wednesday...when I had no extra time..announced that she wanted to speak with me beforehand.

I had literally two minutes before, so I invited her privately into a conference room...and right away...I let her have it. Told her that she had an appointment, did not keep it, did not call to cancel, and now I had no time to give her or her position the proper attention that it deserved. But...I also stressed...in words, language, body language, tone, you name it...this message as well. Literally, I said, "Now we put that behind us, and learn from it." Hey, I've transgressed in that way, too...even in missing a meeting or two. So, I dwelt no longer on any of it, but used what little time I had left to do two things: (1) let her know from my immediate questions that I had studied her file beforehand and knew what I was doing with what I had; and (2) that I was there...with her, and for her.

She had two younger children by her current live-in boyfriend, and it was alleged that this fellow has an anger management issue with another child of hers, a 9-year old son, who was allegedly choked by this step-father figure..slash..boyfriend. And what really helped was this: right away, we went into that courtroom and I whispered to her that I understood that she was in a tough spot in her home..with a 9 year old that is temporarily living with his dad because he does not like, and is afraid of the father of her two younger children. She feels the pressure from others...is torn over the situation, I told her.

This is not dreg or scum. This is yet another vulnerable and frail child of God who is suffering and struggling from life choices...and, thanks be to God, she could tell right away that I do not judge her by her drama or life issues. So, as I continued to whisper alternatives and advice to her, she was directly responsive to me and contributed toward her case. Just one example of the spirit of God touching lives, both hers and mine. Just another example of handling the same thing, but in the ways of Jesus as opposed to the ways of the world. Why should I judge her? Why demean her? How does that help anything, or move the ball down the field?

Repent. Recognize what you and I have done wrong, in the sight of God and each other, and then, with God's help, both sides of the exchange grow from it. Learn from it. Change from it. Move on in life, and with God.

Being right, or righteous, is not being so in the presence of the one we see in the mirror, but rather being right in the presence of God....surrounded also by the joy in the presence of the angels of God, always and everywhere revealed to us within the Name of the Everlasting Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.