

16TH Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B 7.22.18

Jeremiah 23:1-6/Ephesians 2:13-18/

Mark 6:30-34

A NEW MODEL OF LEADERSHIP – LEADERS AMONG THE SHEEP

Forgive me, brothers and sisters, for I have sinned. I spend too much time listening to CNN “Breaking News.” Some days I turn it on first thing in the morning and end the day watching it before bedtime. I know it’s not healthy for mind, body or spirit, but I can’t seem to stop. There’s something about “government by tweeting” that’s as fascinating as it is frightening.

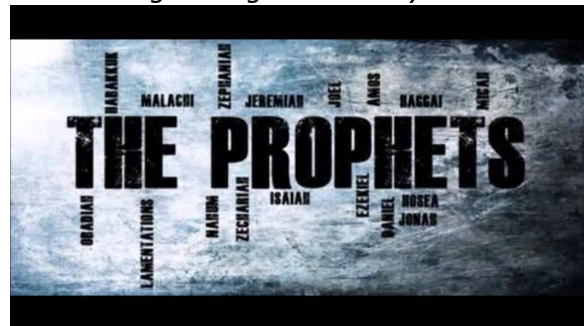


I already received my penance. It was given to me a few weeks ago on the cover of *America Magazine*, a Jesuit journal I subscribe to. The issue portrayed a photo of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, along with the title – *Pay Less Attention to These Men*. That was my penance which I need to put into practice. The magazine’s insightful article, “Why Presidents Should Matter Less,” indicates that almost one fourth of U.S. citizens ages 16-24 said in a 2011 survey that the democratic system was a “bad way” to run the country.

That would be less surprising today, seven years later, given the rise of dictatorial rulers throughout the world. Our president has reveled in the riches of Saudi royalty, congratulated Recep Erdogan of Turkey for eroding checks on his power, maintained his longstanding admiration for Vladimir Putin, and praised the extrajudicial killings of Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines

– a country where four socially active Catholic priests were recently murdered. When President Xi of China eliminated term limits on his office, our president remarked, *Maybe we’ll want to give that a shot someday*. These are now the images that children see of what leaders look like – images that will stick with them as they grow up.

William Faulkner was right when he wrote that *the past is never dead; it isn’t even past*. The prophet Jeremiah today joins Ezekiel and the other Old Testament prophets in railing against ancient leaders who were either weak or cruel, and who used their office to serve themselves. *Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture*. The story the Bible tells of kings and high priests, rulers of all kinds, is mainly a chronicle of scoundrels. They are the antithesis of who they are called to be as agents of God’s loving care. They have scattered the sheep instead of uniting them. The prophet Jeremiah is sent to the people to give them a promise that things will change for them. *Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely*.



All the stories and images about failed kings and leaders that the early Christian community knew from the scriptures took on a special meaning in their encounter with Jesus, the Messiah – a name that means “the anointed one.” In him they

found a leader who loved his people, whose heart was moved with compassion when he saw people hurting, who enlarged his circle by including the stranger and the outcast, the widow and the orphan, the searching and the lost. Jesus himself assumed the title of the “Good Shepherd,” the one who would lead his flock to green pastures and cool waters. His leadership stood in sharp contrast to the self-serving interests of the rulers of old. He called his disciples to follow in his footsteps and he sent them out to exercise leadership after his own example.

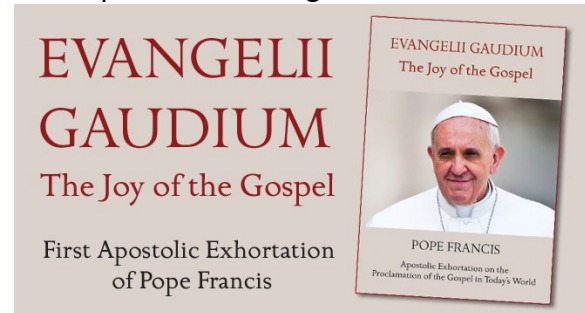


The exercise of leadership is a daunting task, fraught with the danger of misuse and abuse. A leader can bring a people to ruin or to redemption. It’s so easy for us, for me, to criticize leaders – our president and congress, our bishops and clergy, our boss at work and all those who hold authority. The challenge of our scriptures, and the reason we come away to a deserted place each week to rest in the Lord, is to be reminded of the power of Jesus at work in each of us by virtue of our baptism into Christ. Like the apostles and like Mary Magdalene, who was the first to encounter the Risen Lord and proclaim the news of Jesus’ resurrection, we are each commissioned to proclaim the Good News and to make a difference in this world.

There are so many searching people around us – people hungry for instruction, good people looking for direction. They may be parents sick with

grief over the future of a troubled child; a person stripped of his or her dignity due to unemployment; a woman facing pregnancy alone; the elderly who can feel the surge of life leave their declining bodies; people who are angry and confused because of the state of our nation; those who are disillusioned with the Church. These are all the sheep without a shepherd to whom Our Lord sends each of us.

In his first Apostolic Letter – The Joy of the Gospel – Pope Francis challenged all members of the Church to embody leadership after the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Let his words be a call to us not to rely so much on human leaders, but to put our trust in a different power – the divine power of God’s grace and love:



The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first, and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast... Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus

take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance.

(Evangelii Gaudium, #24)

May we discern more clearly our own call to leadership as we offer our allegiance to Christ – the Servant-Leader of us all.



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