

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle C , 2.17.19

Jeremiah 17,5-8; 1 Corinthians 15,12.16-20;

Luke 6:17.20-26

HIDDEN DANGERS: *Beware!*

HIDDEN GRACES: *Be Aware!*

Things are not always as they seem. We had an unfortunate accident on Tuesday here on our parish grounds. It forced the closing of school on Wednesday. Luckily, no one was injured because it happened in the middle of the night. One of the large valley oak trees behind the Religious Resource Center and Kindergarten uprooted and fell over. The branches were so large and widespread that it covered the stairway going up to the amphitheater behind the school and dented rain gutters on the school building as well as on the Religious Resource Center.



It broke a gas line on top of that building so school had to be cancelled. The fast thinking and acting on the part of the construction crew from Oliver and

Company, who were the first on the property early that morning, was a Godsend. By the end of the day the tree was removed, along with the one next to it for safety sake, the gas line was repaired and school was able to re-open the following day.

I thought of that fallen oak as I read the scriptures for today's liturgy and the several references to trees. *Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream.* I don't know why our poor oak tree crashed. Maybe the heavy rains we've been having softened the ground so much that the roots couldn't hold it any longer. I spoke to the arborist whose company did the removal and he explained to me that the root ball of the oak tree doesn't go down very deep. If the roots aren't healthy or don't get enough water, they can weaken on one side or another. Enough wind and down comes the mighty oak. Just from looking at the tree, I doubt if any of us, unless we were trained, could have known if that tree was healthy or not. It looked pretty strong and healthy to me, but, beware... looks can be deceiving.

Things are not always what they seem to be. A couple weeks ago a few parishioners received an email from me. One of them said: *I need to get iTunes gift cards today for some women going through cancer at the hospital but I can't do that right now because of my busy schedule. Can you get it from any store around you possibly now? and I will pay you back later in cash or check. Let me know if you can get the card for these patients.* The return address on that email wasn't mine; the emails were a scam, but obviously the scammer had somehow gotten some of my addresses. One dear parishioner actually

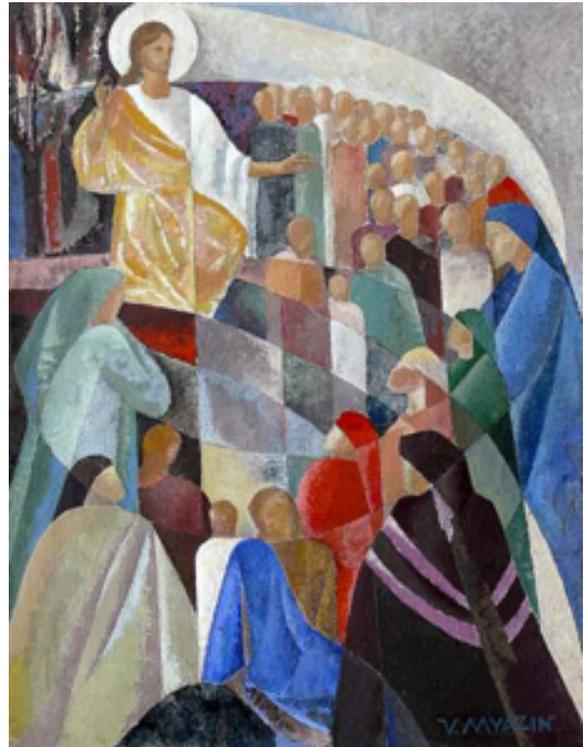
dropped off gift cards at the office, thinking the request was real. She was just too trusting. Beware... things are not always what they seem.



The Word of God today offers us a note of caution, a word of warning that things are not always as they seem. We can easily be deluded into thinking that material prosperity and personal success, good health and the adulation of others will satisfy our deepest needs. In the upside down world of the Gospel we're told that the opposite is true. *Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sad, and expendable. Woe to you who are rich, full, happy, and popular.* That's the weird Good News of the Kingdom of God. A world turned upside down. An economy of blessing that sounds ludicrous. A reordering of priority and privilege that believers have found awkward and even offensive since the gospel was written.

When Our Lord said: "Blessed" are you poor, hungry and so forth, he's not saying to those who are burdened by life that their life is ideal -- far from it. The Lord is teaching that there is a truth within their circumstances, a strength they don't realize. Within the tragedy of their lives is a **hidden grace**. And when the Lord says: *Woe to you who are rich, popular, healthy,* He's saying that there is a **hidden danger** in their lives. It's our faith that helps us to discern the hidden graces and hidden dangers. The

reason the Lord speaks of "woe" to the rich, the contented, the popular is that we can deceive ourselves and not go any deeper than these things. The wealth of this world and its pleasures are not the blessings we may think they are. They can blind us to the real values of life and prevent us from dying to the world and living resurrected lives in Christ. On the other hand, when we face poverty, need, grief and troubles, illusions tend to evaporate quickly. We are liberated to seek the lasting things of God.



Finally, I need to say something today about the meeting that will take place in Rome beginning on Thursday of this week, from February 21-24. Pope Francis has convened a summit that will gather the bishops from around the world who are the presidents of their bishops' conference to address on a world-wide scale the evil of the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults within the Church. They will take up the task of how to make the combatting of sexual abuse a priority in each of their

dioceses. This will not be an easy task. Drawing together the many countries and cultures with wide diversity in their understanding of human sexuality, the role of authority, the oppressive patriarchy of a male-dominated institution will require patience, dialogue and discernment. The successive revelations of abuse covered up by bishops for decades have seriously undermined episcopal authority, illustrating the need for intermediary bodies to which they need to be accountable.



In our own country the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report this past summer unlocked the flood gates for many other states to examine and release names and information about clerical abuse cases and the cover-ups by many, not all, cardinals, bishops and other church authorities. Several dioceses have published the list of names of those credibly accused of abuse. In our own diocese that list will be released in a couple weeks. It's important to note that many of these instances of abuse go back decades. Many of the abusing clerics on the list are deceased, and since 2002 when the bishops adopted the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which is comprehensive in scope, providing a variety of strategies to deal with what the bishops called a "crisis without precedent in our times," the instances of abuse have been checked.

Change has taken place. Nonetheless, there are no words left to describe the level of not just ignorance, but deception as thousands of priests, hidden and protected by bishops, abused tens of thousands of children. The disturbing reports illustrate the extent to which sexual abuse has become an institutional evil, where the institution is protected instead of the abused. We have all, laity and clergy, suffered from this scandal. There are no easy answers or solutions to this complex crisis. Some would try to name homosexuality as the cause. The most widely-accepted research concludes that there is no causative relationship between either celibacy or homosexuality and the sexual victimization of children in the Church.

More intelligent and enlightened minds, including Pope Francis, have named the true cause as "clericalism." It is a system where the participants see themselves as belonging to an exclusive rank -- rigidly hierarchical, closed and secretive. This is a system of privilege, deference, and power, whose members maintain their status at all costs. There is no time or need for dialogue or debate because the elite hold all decision making power. Our prayer for Pope Francis and the bishops with whom he gathers this week must be a prayer for discernment and guidance by the Holy Spirit. May they find in this crisis and its attendant pain and struggle a hidden grace that will lead to true reform. May this mark the end of a system born out of medieval monarchy and bring about a change of consciousness.

To you who have remained faithful to the Church through it all and have based your faith not on an institution, but on the Paschal Mystery of Christ and his death and resurrection, I can only offer humble gratitude.

It is our common Baptism that unites us. As St. Augustine said in the 4th century: *With you I am baptized; for you I am ordained.*

May the waters of Baptism
continue to flow for us
and strengthen the roots of our faith
so that our lives may be
like that biblical tree...
planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
it fears not the heat when it comes;
its leaves stay green;
in the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit.



John Kasper, OSFS