

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Oct 16th 2014

I found myself recently agitated when a major thoroughfare in the city where I live was shut down for road construction. I was faced with brightly colored signs emblazoned with the words: “Do not enter,” “Detour,” and “Alternate route.” These all forced me to find another way across town and continued to stir up my frustrations. How many times have we all rushed to the store only to see a “closed” sign, our hearts dropping? Or looked up on the departure board of a train, bus or airplane on which we intend to travel with the words “delayed” or “canceled” next to it?

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus chastises the Pharisees and scholars of the law for judging and persecuting others – actions which kept people from living in freedom. When we read today’s passage in the context of the full chapter, it is all the more impactful. Jesus makes numerous accusations of the actions of the Pharisees while being a guest in the home of a Pharisee! He is really on quite a rant. “Woe to you...” he says countless times.

Jesus is ultimately chastising the actions of these people because they intentionally keep others from realizing equal access to God’s grace. “Woe to you, scholars of the law! You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped those trying to enter.”

In The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis says it this way: “Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.” (paragraph 47) What is more, the actions of Pope Francis put flesh, bone and a heart on what this looks like. As Sr. Helen Prejean says, “I watch what I do to see what I believe.” Our faith calls us to believe in a God who makes love and grace available to all.

At a ministry conference, I heard a delightful story about hospitality and clearing the path to God’s grace: Mother Teresa was in the United States with some of her Sisters of Charity. They were being hosted by a parish in Arizona where there was an early morning Mass planned just for them. Although it was meant to remain a secret from the public, word got out. By 5:00am, there were crowds of people lined up outside the place where this private Mass was to happen, police barricades holding them back. As the liturgy began, Mother Teresa looked agitated and restless. She was whispering to her sisters and gently pushing them toward the extreme front of this small chapel inside the rectory. Just before the Gospel was proclaimed, she went outside and called out, “Everyone, come inside!” Immediately, the chapel overflowed with people. Then, and only then, was Mother Teresa able to find a small, quiet space in the corner of the chapel, slid down the wall to her knees, and pray in peace. She was not able to rest until she knew everyone was welcome at the table of God’s grace.

My prayer for us is that we can be just as mindful as Jesus, Pope Francis and Mother Teresa as we go about our day. Mindful of the ways we intentionally and unintentionally put up barriers and roadblocks to God's abundant love for others and for ourselves.

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