

31st Sunday – Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Here's a story you may have heard me tell before , but listen anyway... A man had been out of work for months, and was getting desperate, so he took a job at the local zoo...The zoo's gorilla had died, and his job was to put on a gorilla suit and take the gorilla's place until the zoo could get another real gorilla....Now it was very important that he not do anything that would give visitors a clue that he wasn't a real gorilla...The job was very simple....Several times a day he would grab onto a long rope and he would swing from his rock across the lion's pit to the other side, and then swing back over the lion's pit to his rock...This went on for a week and no one suspected that he wasn't a real gorilla...Until one day he got a little careless as he swung over the lion's pit, and he lost his grip on the rope and fell right into the pit....As he laid there on the ground, too stunned to move, he saw this huge, ferocious lion crouching no more than 20 yards away....Scared out of his wits, he began yelling, "Help! Somebody get me outta here!"...As the lion slowly prowled toward him, his screams got more frantic...When the beast was so close he could feel its hot breath,...the lion opened its mouth and said....,"Shut up, you idiot, before you get us both fired!"

So what's the message here?...Just because it looks like a lion and prowls like a lion and growls like a lion, doesn't mean it is a lion. ...Things aren't always what they appear to be...It even applies in the church. ...Someone may look like a Christian and sound like a Christian, but that doesn't necessarily make them a Christian ...Too often people wear masks that hide what they really are...Jesus had very little tolerance for this as we just heard in today's Gospel...He comes down hard on the Scribes and Pharisees – the Jewish religious leaders – who talked a good game when it came to following God's laws,...and certainly looked the part as they strutted about adorned with gaudy religious symbols,.. looking so pious and holy....But their arrogance and their actions were totally contrary to the image of holiness they tried to project...Jesus warns the people, "Do not follow their example, for they do not practice what they preach."...In the verses following today's Gospel ,...Jesus calls them "hypocrites" seven different times...A hypocrite is someone who says one thing, but lives another. ...who can look good on the outside but be far from God on the inside...There's nothing Jesus hates more than a phony, shallow faith...In today's Gospel, He warns us that He has no use for "spiritual phonies." His followers must a genuine and humble faith.

Here's a question...What do you think is the #1 cause of atheism (some people not believing in God)?...The eminent theologian Karl Rahner had an answer. He said the #1 cause of atheism is Christians. ..That's what He said...More specifically, those who call themselves Christian but who don't follow Jesus Christ in how they live their lives...A Christian missionary once asked the great Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, ..."Mr. Gandhi, you quote the words of Christ so often, why have you not become a Christian?" ...Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christianity. I love your Christ...It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Him." ...Ooh, that hurts. ...But he hit the nail on the head... It's not enough to just call ourselves Christian, to use His name to identify ourselves,...to wear our Christianity like we wear a cross around our neck...or an "I love Jesus" t-shirt,...It's not enough to go to church...Going to church doesn't make me a Christian

any more than going to the hospital makes me a doctor... To be a Christian means to try to be like Christ...to strive to be like the One we say we believe in.

This Gospel challenges us to LIVE our Christianity...to LIVE our faith...On our Youth Retreat last weekend, the young people were reminded that they were on the train to GREATNESS, ...and they shouldn't let anything derail that train...they shouldn't let any temptation or pressure or evil influence knock them off the track and keep them from achieving the GREATNESS God wants for them.

Now to many people, the word GREATNESS means being successful,...or famous, ...making lots of money,...excelling in academics or sports...That's how the world looks at GREATNESS.But to Jesus, greatness means something totally different... In our Gospel, Jesus says to the people,...“He who is greatest among you shall be your servant....He who humbles himself shall be exalted.”...And in another part of the Gospels, when the apostles, John and James, ask Jesus which of them was the greatest,...He tells them the same thing,...“Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant.”... For Jesus, if you wanna be great, then become a servant of others...If you wanna be first, then become last...His concept of greatness was totally alien to the world back then, and - sad to say – it still is today. Jesus wants us all to be great, but He set a new standard for what that means.

Greatness in the Kingdom of God is all about serving...all about giving. ...all about others...The great people in the Kingdom of God aren't the ones who make the most money...The great ones are those who give the most of themselves....The great people in the Kingdom of God aren't the people who wield the most power...The great ones are those who love their neighbors and help those in need. ...The great people in the Kingdom of God aren't the people with the most talent...The great ones are those who use whatever talent they've been given – great or small – to serve their brothers and sisters.

My friends, this is the bedrock of our faith,...This is the core of all that Jesus taught and preached and modeled for us in His life on earth...This is the heart of what being a Christian means...This is what Jesus saw sadly lacking in how the Scribes and Pharisees were honoring God....That's why He warned the people not to follow their way but to follow His way of honoring God,...the same way He calls us to live our Christian faith,...to practice what we preach,...to live what we say we believe...Because when we don't,...when we do only what's convenient, do only what doesn't interrupt our schedule...or doesn't take up too much of our time,...or what isn't too hard,...when we pick and choose what parts of the Bible to follow,...then non-believers will conclude that our Christianity is all show, and that we don't practice what we preach, just like the Pharisees....Only when our words, what we say we believe,...become our deeds, our actions,...do they become contagious and draw people to the Gospel...draw people to Jesus Christ.

In his book, *Twelve Tests of Character*, Harry Emerson Fosdick tells about a Turkish soldier who chases a brother and sister down a dead-end street....The brother is shot and killed. Somehow the sister gets away....Sometime later, the sister is captured.... She's a nurse and

she's forced to work in the field hospital for the enemy... One day, a critically wounded soldier is brought to the field hospital...and she was the nurse who had to work on him....She and the wounded soldier recognized each other...He was one who had killed her brother...Now she knew that if she didn't do something for him right away, he would die...But she treated him and nursed him back to health....The soldier later asks her why she didn't let him die, why she treated him with kindness and mercy. ...She replies, "Because I serve the One who said, 'Love your enemies and do them good.' That is my faith."... After a moment of silence, the soldier grabs her hand and says, "Tell me more of your Lord... I would give anything to have faith like yours."

That's what we should want...isn't it? For others to see how our faith in Jesus Christ is working in our lives, how it makes us do what we do,...how it makes us who we are so that they will want what we have, ...so that they will give anything to have a faith like ours...May we always live in a way that draws others to Jesus Christ. AMEN!