10th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B, 6.10.18
Genesis 3:9-15/2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1/
Mark 3:20-35

FROM SCAM TO SALVATION

I almost fell for it again – a scam phone call. At the parish office we often get calls from people asking for some kind of assistance. Another one came in this past week. Father, my family and I recently joined the parish and met you after mass. Do you remember us introducing ourselves? Well, what was I going to say? “No, I don’t remember you”? Of course, I said “Yes.” Then he shared his sad story. He was in San Diego with his family for a funeral. They had an accident and the car was badly damaged. They had no way of getting home; the car rental agency wouldn’t accept a check and their credit card had just expired. All legitimate situations that would tug at the heartstrings of a priest who’s supposed to be in the business of helping people, right? Luckily, I quickly remembered a similar call several years ago that began the same way. Father, my wife and I met you on Sunday after the 9:30 mass; we just moved into the area. Do you remember? That time -- hook, line and sinker -- I fell for the scam and actually ended up wiring the guy money. This time I knew better than to enter into an unholy alliance with this tempter. “Sorry, we just don’t have the resources to assist you at this time.”

Later that day I heard this story about a 33-year-old husband and dad from Utah named Ben who found this message on his Facebook page: “My name is Joel from Liberia, West Africa. I need some assistance from you. Business or financial assistance dat [sic] will help empower me.” A scam, Ben thought immediately. Intrigued, Ben replied to the message, “How can I help?” He explains, ”I just wanted to go down this rabbit hole and see what were the tricks they use to get people.” Ben thought he would have a good story to tell on YouTube about “internet scamming.”

But Ben couldn’t imagine what would happen next. "Joel" in Africa proposed a business partnership involving used electronics. Ben would send the guy in Africa used electronics which he would sell for him. Ben wouldn’t bite on that. Instead, Ben proposed a different partnership. Ben pretended that he owned a photography business and could use some photos of an African sunset. Ben didn’t expect to hear anything from Joel, but a few weeks later, an envelope arrived with two photos - neither very good. Ben thanked Joel for the photos, but said Joel needed a better camera. So Ben sent Joel a $60 camera. Ben’s family thought he was crazy to correspond with some stranger in Liberia. But, over time, Joel got to be pretty good with that camera. Ben's skepticism melted when he received Joel's photos capturing the poverty in the man’s village near Monrovia. Now Ben had to figure out a way to compensate Joel - or Ben would be the scammer.

So Ben put together a booklet from Joel’s pictures. He titled the book By D Grace of God, a phrase Joel used frequently in his e-mails to Ben. The plan was to sell a couple dozen books to relatives and friends, but sales exploded via YouTube. Ben told
Joel he would wire $1,000 of the proceeds. Joel could have half for his family - but the other $500 Joel had to donate to charity in Liberia. Ben wired the money - and thought that would be the last he would hear from Joel. But a new batch of photos arrived: poor students at four schools in Liberia with new backpacks, notebooks and school supplies that Joel had bought with the $500. Joel was good to his word - and more than willing to work. So Ben in Utah and Joel in Liberia have become "business partners." They split the profits 50-50: Joel, using his share to help his family and neighbors and Ben, creating a YouTube series about Joel and his life and work in West Africa. "I really thought I was going to make a YouTube series about messing with a scammer," Ben said. "This story turned out to be something completely different."

Our scriptures today are challenging – we’re faced with some serious conflicts which have dire consequences. Adam and Eve, those mythical parents of ours who fall for the serpent’s scam, find themselves at odds with God. Neither wants to acknowledge the error of their ways but pass the blame to the serpent who tempted them. In that tension we recognize the constant struggle between good and evil. We see it at large in our world. Good people at war with one another, unjust economic systems that were set up to help people now exploit the vulnerable. Groups committed to various goals demean those who disagree with them. In our families we may encounter infidelity, abuse and alienation. We find in ourselves strains of addiction, resentment and despair. We’re the offspring of the woman in the garden and we’re constantly at odds with the offspring of the serpent.

Into this cosmic battle, comes the announcement of Jesus that the Kingdom of God is near. All the powers of darkness cannot stand up to the grace, the goodness, the mercy and forgiveness that Jesus offers to those who will accept his way and follow him. But his way is a challenging one. It knocks over the money changers tables who are exploiting the poor at the entrance to the temple. It stands up to the sources of power and authority – both political and religious – when they fail to serve people. Jesus’ way sees the hungry crowds on the hillside and, instead of sending them away as his disciples suggest, finds a way to feed them. Jesus’ way insists that the bonds of family submit to an even deeper relationship in the family of God. Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother.
In today's Gospel, Jesus warns against "blaspheming against the Holy Spirit." To "blaspheme" against the Spirit of God is to be so mired in cynicism and skepticism that we refuse to embrace the possibilities for realizing the hope of God's grace. We've all felt such hopelessness at times in our lives: the cynicism that concedes the world to evil and sin. Ben's initial skepticism - a kind of "blasphemy," in the context of today's Gospel - is transformed into an experience of salvation and mercy because of his openness to engage Joel in the possibility of realizing something good in their working together. For Jesus, the crushing pessimism that God's grace is inaccessible to us condemns us to lives of sadness and isolation, not the lives of meaning and joy God envisions for us.

If we're to walk the way of Jesus and win this battle against Satan we have to risk, to take a chance – like Ben did – that we won't be scammed, and that there are holy alliances that we can enter into with people of good will. We can make a difference in this world. We can each do our part to overcome the powers of darkness and reflect the light of Christ which has been poured into our hearts. The spiritual author and guide, Henri Nouwen, offers some challenging but encouraging words. You are Christian, Nouwen writes, only so long as you look forward to a new world, so long as you pose critical questions to the society you live in, so long as you emphasize the need of conversion both for yourself and for the world, so long as you stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying that a new world is yet to come. You are a Christian only when you believe that you have a role to play in the realization of this new kingdom, and when you urge everyone you meet with a holy unrest to make haste so that the promise might soon be fulfilled. So long as you live as a Christian you keep looking for a new order, a new structure, a new life.

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and Mother.

Mark 3:35

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