November 17, 2019: Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The other day, on my day off, I went to confession at Saint Joseph’s Shrine in Lowell. I was dressed in sweats and sneakers. As I waited, I was sitting down next to a husband and wife who had come in before me. When I first sat down, the husband whispered to the wife to move her handbag that was between her and me. She promptly moved it. I found it pretty amusing and wondered if they would have had the same reaction if I came dressed in my clerics. I understand why he did it, but at the same time it is the classic ‘judging a book by its cover’.

The reality is that we all make judgements that are not based on any real facts, but simply on our observation of a particular situation. We look at the person(s) that we come into contact with and quickly determine who they are and how we should address them. Many times these assessments are not even a conscious action, but reflexive in many ways. The way we have been raised, interactions throughout our lives, the very circumstances we find ourselves in, or other issues throughout our personal history, can all impact that reflexive judgement. It is natural and in some ways necessary, but it can also easily degenerate into a sinful judgement.

Saint James wrote so long ago in his letter to the Church, “My brothers [and sisters], show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs? Listen, my beloved brothers. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom that He promised to those who love Him?”

The reality is that our judgements can easily lead to sinful divisions. We hear an accent and wonder what their status is. We look at the color of their skin and wonder if they belong here. We look at their tattoos, or piercings, or such, and wonder what they might be up to. We look at how they are dressed and think that what they are wearing is not appropriate, and wonder what is wrong with them. We look at their reaction in a particular situation, and when it does not measure up to our notion of what should happen, we wonder how they can be so clueless.

We have no further information than what we perceive as pertinent information, and in that moment we have entered into sin. But, normally we do not leave it at that; many times, as Saint James pointed out, we choose to act on our instinct and compound one sin with another. Maybe we start talking about the person to another. Maybe we confront the person in a way that tells them we think something is wrong with them. We make it clear that they are not meeting our standards and they need to prove themselves to us.

It is through these judgements that we lose sight of our common humanity. Every single human being on this planet is in the exact same place. We are all sinners, we are all broken, and we all act in ways that contravene the will of God. Each person on this planet is also unconditionally loved by God. Each has been endowed with particular gifts and talents intended to help God’s plan of salvation be realized. The reality is that every issue or concern we use to create division is a human “creation” and does not come from God. God sees every single human being in the same way—as a person in need of the saving actions and love of Jesus Christ.

Whether or not a person is using their gifts, or living their lives to their full potential, cannot be a human judgement. We can judge an action as being right or wrong and, in fact, we must do so. We must help people realize that God has determined the truth and we must abide by that truth. But at the same time, we cannot judge the person for choosing to act contrary to God’s will. We do not know where their heart is and where their struggle is coming from.

A perfect example of this comes from the difference between King Saul and King David. King Saul was ordered by God to completely wipe out a city, but he chose not to for his own reasons. He felt he could give greater glory to God by following his own instincts as to what to do. King David clearly desired to live his life in accord with God’s will but he messed up a lot. He committed adultery and then had the husband murdered. In most human estimates the actions of Saul would be exemplary since he looked to act with mercy, while David’s actions seem to be horrendous and deserving of condemnation.
The problem is that God saw it very differently. Saul lost his kingdom over what he did. King David was promised that his throne would stand for ever. Why? Saul acted in arrogance. He, unlike Abraham, never consulted God about changing the plans. He decided he knew better than God and then never really repented of what he did. David, on the other hand, when confronted with his actions immediately repented. In fact, how God described David was: “Then He removed [Saul] and raised up David as their king; of him He testified, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.’” And David sought to do that but at times failed. God’s judgment is ultimately about the heart and not simply the actions. That is why we cannot judge a person, for we can never judge their heart. As the saying goes, “Love the sinner but hate the sin.”

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian