

Fr. Curtis Miller     September 26-27, 2020     Homily for the 26<sup>th</sup> Sun. in Ordinary Time

In this parable of the two brothers, we see that actions speak louder than words. The first brother said that he wouldn't help his father in the field, but then thought better of it and went out to work, while the second brother did the opposite: he said the right thing, but he didn't follow through with his actions.

I'm afraid that too many of us have been trained to give the "right" answer, rather than the true answer, to say what sounds good in order to get along or to get ahead. In an interview for a promotion at work, we might say what we think our boss wants to hear, rather than the truth. Sadly, I often see this when I interview candidates for Confirmation and ask, "Do you go to Mass every week?" Almost everyone says, "Yes, Father," even though many don't actually go that often. But if I follow up and say, "I haven't seen you in Church for a few weeks. Are you going to Mass somewhere else?" Often they say something like, "Well, no. I've just been really busy for the past couple weeks."

"When was the last time you went to Mass?"

"Sometime last month, I think."

It was actually Christmas, four months ago.

I don't bring this up to pick on Confirmation candidates. I see this habit in many people. I think its part of human nature, a desire to please, to avoid conflict, to get along. But when we are dishonest, we miss out on having a real relationship with other people. This includes our relationship with God.

If we say that we are Christians and that we follow the teachings of the Church, but we don't actually live that out, then we're doing ourselves a disservice, and perhaps the only person we're fooling is ourselves. Now, obviously, none of us is perfect, and none of us perfectly lives out every aspect of our Faith. If we can honestly own up to that fact, though, and put in the effort to do better, then we will improve. But if we always say, "I'm fine, I'm all set," when that isn't true, then we will always remain stuck where we are. It would be like going to a doctor's appointment with a health problem, saying that we feel fine, we exercise regularly, and we have a healthy diet, when that's not true. If we act that way, then we will never be cured. This is what the Sacrament of Confession is supposed to help us with, not to focus on our faults, but to honestly acknowledge them so that we can do better in the future.

I knew someone whose favorite quote was: "The key to success is sincerity... And when you can fake that, then you've really got it made." He thought this quote was quite clever, he repeated it often, and perhaps lived according to it. Without getting into the details of his life, he was pretty successful... for a while, but things didn't turn out well. Being fake inevitably catches up with us.

Let us be genuine and authentic. Let's not just talk the talk, but walk the walk. If we say that we're going to do something or that we are something, then our actions should correspond. Otherwise, we'll get used to being fake and superficial, and we'll miss out on what's real.

It reminds me of when I was in seminary down in Providence and a priest from Vermont came to visit. He brought along a big jug of maple syrup as a gift for the house. Many of the priests and seminarians there had never had real maple syrup. We took it out to have with pancakes at breakfast one day, and most everyone liked it. But one of the priests took a bite and clearly he didn't like it, so he doused it with the fake syrup. We Vermonters gave him a hard time, but the priest said that he was used to the taste of the fake syrup. Obviously, the point of this story is not about maple syrup. It's about how easy it is to get used to being fake and missing out on something better: what's real.

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once reflected that we sometimes get the sneaking suspicion that we're not good enough, so we pretend to be someone else, we hide behind a fake saintly persona. We even do this in Church. But we shouldn't. Church is precisely the place where we can come before God without fear of being rejected for who we are, where we can be open about our weaknesses and struggles, and where we can then receive grace from God to grow spiritually. We should not judge each other, either, because we are all fellow sinners, in need of God's grace. We should be honest with each other, so that we can support each other in becoming better.

When I was interviewing candidates for Confirmation a few years ago in my last parish, I asked one student the same old question: "Do you go to Mass every week?" I was ready for the same cookie cutter response, so I was surprised when she replied, "No, I don't go as often as I should." I asked her why, and we had a very good conversation. We talked about why it's important to go to Mass, what was going on in her life, and we came up with a plan for her to come more often. After Confirmation, I saw very few of her classmates who gave the "right" answer at Mass. But she started coming more often, not every week, but about two or three times a month. That's a good start.

When we're honest with God, ourselves, and each other, then we can experience growth like that, too.