

3rd Sunday of Lent “The Good Medicine of a Scriptural Jesus”
Fr. Frank Schuster

The readings this Sunday remind me of Friedrich Schleiermacher for some reason. Do you remember him? He was a Lutheran theologian, living about two hundred years ago in Germany, who argued that religion is less about what you think and more about what you feel. He was reacting partly to the Catholic Church and our love for objective doctrine. But personally I think he was mostly reacting to another Lutheran, Immanuel Kant, and his popular book, “Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone”. Schleiermacher argued very persuasively his position that religion is first and foremost not about “reason” but about “God consciousness”, a sense and taste for the infinite. For example, in our circle of friends, there are some people who have a greater ear for music than others and some have a greater taste to distinguish the subtleties of fine wine better than others, and there are also those of us who have a greater God consciousness than others. If we were to apply this theory to our congregation, it could provide an explanation why we have parishioners who are here every day of the week, parishioners who are here every Sunday, and parishioners who are somewhat tone deaf to the need to be here regularly and do not pray as often as they should. The idea here is some people have a more developed God consciousness than others. In this way evangelization consists of encouraging the growth of God consciousness, enhancing a sense and taste for the infinite. Schleiermacher’s system was very well thought out and included an elaborate description of what the consciousness of the holy looked like and what the consciousness of sin looked like.

Looking back, I think it was rather prophetic that the Church condemned his theological approach, and for good reasons. From the Church’s perspective, although we receive spiritual consolations and a spiritual consciousness of what is holy and evil, and yes there is a sense and taste for God up to a point, there is nevertheless objective truth, things that are simply right or wrong whether we are conscious of them or not. Sin has a way of distorting our consciousness. Sin has a way of over time distorting a religious community’s or even a country’s consciousness of right and wrong. As close as the disciples were to Jesus, their God consciousness was ironically off most of the time. After Jesus was arrested, the disciples fled in every direction. One wonders, how are we any different? For example, it seems like for the God consciousness of a republican, Jesus is a conveniently a fellow republican and for the God consciousness of a democrat Jesus is conveniently a fellow democrat. Without doctrine, without objective truth, our so called God consciousness can reduce our idea of Jesus to a mere projection of the ego, another good definition for an idol. In my thinking, it was only when the risen Jesus breathed on the Apostles that they finally got it. It was only then that they were truly commissioned, one could say ordained, for the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and handing on the deposit of faith to their successors.

This is why, as we drift around in our religious consciousness, we need to stay connected to the lifeline of sacred scripture, to the lifeline of concrete doctrines, to the lifeline of the deposit of faith handed down to us by the Lord. The worst days of the Catholic Church, as we have seen recently with the latest scandals, are when priests and bishops fail to follow the Church’s own moral doctrines handed down to us from the Lord. What kind of understanding of Jesus were these abusive priests and bishops operating from? It most certainly wasn’t the Jesus presented to us in the Gospels.

This is why Schleiermacher has been on my mind lately. You see, it seems to me, the idea of religion as a mere feeling, has taken hold just about every place in our day and age, sometimes even in the hierarchy of the Church. The religiosity of many has moved away from what scripture and tradition has to say about Jesus to what my sense and taste has to say about Jesus. In the process, the Jesus of Sacred Scripture gets replaced with a too comfortable idea of Jesus, a cuddly Jesus, a teddy bear Jesus, a Jesus that snuggles us and consoles us no matter what awful thing we think, say, or do. And then, Gospel readings like the one we have today come along of Jesus cursing a fig tree, and it is very good medicine.

Now, please understand that I don't have anything against the idea of a personal Lord and savior who cares for us. He does. It is healthy to have a personal relationship with Jesus until it disintegrates to, "Jesus says in my heart, that I can go to Church whenever I feel like it and not go to Church when I don't feel like it, never mind the third commandment or that I belong to a community, it is all about me". Or, "Jesus told me that I can be an OK Catholic while engaging in promiscuous, irresponsible or dangerous behavior". Or "illegal drug use won't imperil my soul, God is good with it". Or, "it is OK to cheat on my spouse, God understands." Or, "I know there are people who are impoverished in our world and community, but God is OK with me not lifting a finger to help". Or, "I don't need to confess my sins to anyone, me and my buddy Jesus can handle my sins on our own." (Is anyone here feeling uncomfortable yet☺?) Or, perhaps the most dangerous of all, "Everyone is going to heaven. No one really goes to hell". I believe these attitudes are really dangerous for our souls. Attitudes like, "I will pick and choose the scriptures I like about Jesus and disregard the uncomfortable passages about Jesus because religion is not about what the Church teaches, or the bible for that matter. Religion is about my God consciousness and my sense and taste of the infinite."

My friends, all three readings this weekend give us a different appreciation of God...a strong God, a tough love God. ...And so Moses was tending a flock when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire flaming out of a bush. When Moses answers God's invitation to come closer, God soon says, "stop, come no nearer". "Remove the sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground." Take a second and consider what this means. Take a second and consider the reverence God demands of Moses. And in this passage, God is rightly to be feared. It says Moses hid his face because he was afraid. We can ask ourselves, what would this mean for us today? What does it mean to take off our shoes when we are in the presence of the divine? Would this call us to a greater reverence to the Almighty and his holy places? Would this effect my prayer life any? How would this effect my behavior toward God and others? God then offers Moses the wonderful message that God will save the Hebrews from the hands of the Egyptians. This message must have felt good to Moses, but not without some fear.

Before embarking on his mission, however, Moses asks for God's name. God's response is "I am who I am". Which is the same to say, I am your God you are my creation. For every little bit of information you can absorb, I am infinitely more. I will not give you a name because I refuse to be turned into an idol, like the false gods my chosen people turn to at times. And so, the name Yahweh came forth from this discussion, translated I AM, a name considered to be so holy by the Jews it was blasphemy to utter it. For us today, the second commandment comes to mind, we are reminded why we should not take the Lord's name in vain. After all, if we had a

healthy and biblical understanding of the holiness of the names we use to reference the Deity, we would shudder if we heard the Lord's name in vain. We might even duck for cover.

Along those lines, we turn to our second reading, St. Paul reflects on the Exodus and writes "our ancestors ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, yet God was not pleased with most of them, so they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us so that we might not desire evil things, as they did." Now, this is scary stuff. It says God will bless us if we follow His commands. It also says loud and clear that God may step out of the way sometimes and allow that there be consequences for our actions. St. Paul, ultimately, is calling on Corinth to a higher reverence and fidelity to God. For us, a greater fidelity and respect might come in the form of honoring the third commandment, by having a greater reverence for the Sabbath and holy days of obligation, scheduling more prayer time for ourselves, and for our family.

Now enter in our Gospel today, "Jesus said to them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did.'" Yikes! Jesus continues on and gives us the story of the fig tree that doesn't bear any fruit. Jesus commands that if the fig tree doesn't bear fruit soon, to "cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?" This is scary stuff. I mean, where is my teddy bear Jesus now? Where is the Jesus that tells me I am OK no matter what sin I am committing?

Christians, the Church this Sunday is challenging us with a scriptural Jesus. Is Jesus a healer? Yes. Is Jesus our redeemer? Yes. "Does Jesus love me?" Yes! There is the proof. There is the proof. His love for us flows from the cross there to our altar here where he truly offers us his body and blood as sacred nourishment for the soul. That is how much he loves us! We should take care however to not take his love for granted. Does Jesus love us? Yes! Does he redeem us? Yes! Does he demand our love and our obedience in return? Yes! This means we must remember that Jesus Christ is Lord, not one day a week but every hour of every day. Every hour that we live on earth is a gift. God does not owe us anything. We owe God everything. The good news is, whether we have a sense, taste or feeling of the infinite or not, our mysterious Lord has called each and every one of us to His friendship, whether we feel like it or not. From those preaching at the pulpits to those sitting in the pews, this friendship with the Lord will ultimately be defined by how we live our discipleship, in how we conduct ourselves in the world in which we live, as members of the Body of Christ, the spouse of Jesus, the one holy Catholic and apostolic Church.