

33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Warning against Spiritual Laziness”

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As the days get shorter and shorter, darker and darker and damper and damper, even the Church’s selection of scripture readings this time of year tend to get a bit dark as well. The readings always get apocalyptic this time of year as we approach the solemnity of Christ the King that represents the end of the liturgical year. Jesus says in front of the Temple in Jerusalem, “All that you see here- the days are coming when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.” These are frightening words. And for all you history buffs, Jesus’ prophesy here in fact actually came to pass. In 70 AD, the temple was in fact destroyed. All that was left was the western retaining wall, which is now called the Wailing Wall, the most holy site in Judaism.

Malachi in the first reading joins in the apocalyptic chorus saying, “Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and all evildoers will be stubble.” Even St. Paul is encouraging his disciples against apathy in the second reading. Why are the readings this November becoming more and more frightening? My friends, my take is the readings this time of year are warning us against spiritual apathy. As the days get shorter, it becomes easier to go through our days on autopilot, one cup of coffee at a time, forgetting what is important. The scriptures this time of year warn us to guard against spiritual laziness by reminding us that we are mortal and that we do not have all the time in the world. We should not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And this is a very difficult and challenging reminder.

After all, who here wants to think about their mortality? Raise your hand! I don’t want to think about death. I don’t want to think about heaven and hell right now. I want to think about football. Go Seahawks, right? During November, however, the Gospel says, “Tough, I got news for you pal, we better think about it”. We will die someday. There will be an accounting of my life! There is a real possibility of heaven or hell in my future. And time isn’t as plentiful as I would like to delude myself into thinking! God has given us the gift of time for us to move about. God has given us the gift of talents so that we may build up his kingdom. God has given us the gift of life and relationships. But these gifts are temporary. We will give them back to God someday and much sooner than we would like. The Gospels challenge us to contemplate those areas in our lives that we know we need to correct but have been putting off because we have been lulled in complacency by a false belief that we have all the time in the world...when we don’t.

Well, once I complete that next project at work or school, then I will take more time for prayer each day and go to Church more regularly. There is no rush. After I max out my credit card for this that or the other thing, I will become more generous someday. There is no rush. After I achieve my career goals then I will make my family my first priority, there is no rush. I can wait until next year before I give up the grudge I have with this person or that family member. There’s no rush. I’ll wait until next year before I give God my first fruits of my time, talent and treasure. There’s time to get my priorities in order, there’s no rush. My friends, the lectionary has a way of reminding us this time of year that the road to hell was paved by people who thought there was no rush.

C.S. Lewis underscores that point in his book, the Screwtape Letters. I love that book. Any of you read it yet? I have mentioned a few passages from this book over the years. Here is another wonderful tidbit. For those uninitiated to this book, Screwtape is a demon writing to his nephew Wormwood giving advice on how to ruin souls. He finishes the twelfth letter to his Nephew with the wicked advice, “Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts, your affectionate uncle Screwtape.”

Jesus is very clear in his warning to us today: when it comes to the care of our souls, we should not put off to tomorrow what we should be doing today. And as a professional procrastinator myself, I find this a helpful message. A pastoral invitation would be for us to look at our relationships in our families and find a broken relationship to heal. Let’s heal the relationships in our family starting today so we can enjoy Thanksgiving at the end of the month and not choke on the turkey. Meanwhile, let’s look at our health and lifestyle and, if necessary, make the changes we need to make. We could all probably be better stewards there. And let’s look at our financial situation and get our priorities in order. But first and foremost, let’s look at our relationship with God and, if necessary, make the right choices so that our souls become healthier and holier, united with God’s will for us each and every day. And perhaps our souls can demonstrate that love for God a little more by being kinder as well and compassionate, especially to the most vulnerable in our world, from the unborn to the elderly and every stage and demographic in between. Ultimately, we are invited to better stewardship of all the gifts God has given us in his creation. For at the end of time, there will be an accounting.

This is a difficult challenge. Some might call this message uncomfortable. It is an uncomfortable message in an uncomfortable time of year. But if the readings say anything today, they say one thing loud and clear. Being a follower of Jesus isn’t for wimps! Being a Christian takes work. The good news is Christianity shows us the path to heaven. There is a catch though. The road to heaven is the one that includes a cross.