

HOMILY SUNDAY 26 – A
“Metanoia – Doing The Will of God”
(Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32)

A dishonest painter hired to paint a church thinned the paint with water thinking that as long as it didn't rain he would get away with it. That night there was a big storm. He ran to the Church in the morning and saw that the paint was running down the walls forming letters. As he got closer he could make out the words and read, “Repaint, you thinner, and thin no more.”

Today's gospel presents us with a dilemma, captured succinctly by John McLaughlin in his comment in the *Living With Christ* for this Sunday: “If we say ‘no’ but later follow God's will, our actions will count, not our words. On the other hand, we have to take our words seriously. It is easy to say we love God, but if we do not put that into action, then our words are empty.

May I suggest that the message for us today is to repent, let go of power and control and do God's will.

The fact that this passage is from Matthew's gospel provides us with a very specific context of the human lust for power and control that goes beyond a mere call to repentance. As Michael Crosby puts it in his book *The Dysfunctional Church*, “from the beginning to the end of Matthew's gospel, but especially with this section (20:17-24:2), it becomes clear that the underlying reason for the death of Jesus is the unwillingness of the leaders to submit to his authority. All conflicts with him are predicated on the basis that the leaders were obsessed with maintaining their position, were threatened by Jesus' authority, and, finally, had to destroy him in order to maintain their supply of authority.”

That lust for power and control, that obsession, or as Crosby asserts in the end, that addiction, is subtle and pervasive and all too present in our lives and in the life of the Church that seeks to present the face of Christ to the world. Let me share an example from my own experience.

In 1978, another Oblate priest and I were asked by the provincial superior of the Oblates at that time to take on responsibility for the community of Île-a-là-Crosse in northern Saskatchewan. The pastor was old, frail, losing his memory and his ability to minister effectively. We accepted on the condition that we would try to do it in a new way as co-pastors. Our plan was to live together as Oblates in that faith community for one week, minister together as co-pastors and then go to our separate missions for one week.

Trying to be co-pastors was quite a challenge. Who would have which office? Who would be in charge of the finances? What if the other priest was more popular with the people? It was quite a growing and sometimes painful growing experience. One incident in particular stands out in my mind.

One day we had a meeting at the hospital with the pastoral care team about how best to provide pastoral care to the patients in the hospital. That night I noticed that my fellow priest was somewhat restless and agitated. Since we were getting involved with Marriage Encounter, I suggested that we dialogue, which meant writing out our feelings and then sharing them with each other. He resisted at first but then accepted and we both took five minutes to write out our feelings then exchanged our papers.

When he handed me what he had written, I read the words, “At the meeting today at the hospital, I felt like they would do what you want no matter what I said.” Ouch – it seems that without even realizing it, I was giving to others the impression that I was in charge here, even though we were trying to co-pastor. That was the first time in my life that I became aware of my tendency to want power and control, and how it was affecting a brother Oblate.

That was a wake-up call for me! Thank God I happened to be reading a book by Fr. John Powell at that time entitled *He Touched Me* in which he described how we go through Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s stages of dying when we become aware of a painful truth about ourselves. Those stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance and then we can move on to a newer kind of life. That was a guide for me as I entered into a humbling process of healing my defect of character, the tendency to want power and control.

This incident also reminded me of an important teaching by Fr. Richard Rohr that good spirituality is all about letting go. I had to learn to let go of my compulsion to exercise power and control over others in my ministry.

This, I believe, is what is at stake in today’s gospel. The Jewish leaders of the time were completely addicted to their version of authority that gave them power and control over others. Unfortunately, they were unwilling to repent, to change, to let go of that unhealthy compulsion for security and status. That is why the gospel begins with the statement, “When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching and challenged his authority.

So Jesus tells them the story about two sons, one who at first resisted the father’s request, but later repented and did what the father asked of him, and another son who at first agreed, but in the end did not do what was asked of him. The leaders were able to answer the question Jesus asked correctly, but in their own lives and in their own addiction to power and control, were not able to do the Father’s will, repent, let go of their lust for power and control, heal that deep defect of character, and respond with belief in Jesus and his authority given to him by the same Father the leaders claimed to believe in and serve.

The other readings for this Sunday simply deepen this message. The first reading speaks of the righteous who become stubborn, commit iniquity and will die unrepentant, while the wicked who repent will live. Certainly the first group describes the Jewish leaders.

The psalm in turn speaks of humble repentant faith in a God of compassion, mercy and steadfast love. This is the God the Jewish leaders were supposed to be serving, but they had turned their religiosity into a self-serving source of power and control for themselves.

The second reading is the beautiful hymn to the Philippians about the self-emptying love of Christ shown on the Cross, in which Jesus gave up all power and control. That is the power of God at its best, the power of powerlessness. And that is what Jesus was teaching the people in the temple, the very center of the Jewish nation and view of the cosmos, the symbolic center of the power and control that the Jewish leaders had usurped to themselves. No wonder they came to Jesus that day and challenged his authority to teach as he was.

The challenge for us is to get the message. We are invited not only to repent of our sins, but also to go deeper and to discover within ourselves any defects of character that make us sin, to come to Jesus for healing of those defects of character, unlike the religious leaders of his time who ended up killing him rather than changing.

One simple way to enter into this process of *metanoia*, of repentance and healing is to work the Steps of the 12 Step program of Alcoholic Anonymous. Step Four is an examination of conscience. Step Five is an experience of forgiveness as I confess my wrongdoing to God, myself and another human being. Steps 6 & 7 take us deeper into facing our defects of character and praying that God will heal us and remove them from our lives. Then Steps 8 & 9 takes us into a process of experiencing forgiveness from those we hurt as a way of being reconciled with them. What a gift these simple Steps are to anyone who wants to live today's gospel, repent, heal and in the end, truly do the Father's will.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a miracle of change, of transformation – bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, so that we who celebrate and receive together may become Body of Christ and do God's will in the world – so that the world will also be transformed into the Body of Christ.

So in the end, let us genuinely repent with humble faith, let go of power and control in our lives and in the life of the Church, and truly do God's will.