

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time + 9 Feb 2025 + Isa 6:1-8 + I Cor 15:1-11 + Luke 5:1-11

One of the big battles in our society today is over so-called 'cancel culture.' The Pew research center did an interesting study on this concept, which, not surprisingly, is viewed very differently based on one's political leanings. Some think that this is an important way to hold people accountable for their actions. Others think that it is form of mob mentality that rushes to judgment in order to 'cancel' a person. So as in all things, a balance is needed here, and our society today also struggles in balance and nuance. But I also think this struggle should make us Christians stop and consider a difficult question: what is the right way to balance the reality that actions have consequences, but at the same time allow people to change for the better, to be converted, and to have a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance?

If we look at all of our readings this weekend, we see a common theme; and that is, God does not call the perfect, but rather He calls sinners. And that's a really good thing, because if He didn't call sinners, He wouldn't have anyone to call! Now we all know that, but do we *believe it*? Do you believe that God can and in fact *wants* to use you, sinner that you are, for His purposes? St. Paul sure did. Listen again to his very powerful words our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today from his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians: "*by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective.*" *By the grace of God I am what I am.* Could I say that?

You see, in writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul honestly owns up to the truth that he was *not fit to be called an apostle*. After all, he *persecuted the Church of God*. How so? Well, in the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about the stoning of St. Stephen—the first martyr of the Church. And at the end of the account, in response to a fiery sermon that Stephen had given, the people *cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul*. Paul was known as *Saul* before his conversion. And so while Paul was probably not directly responsible for Stephen's death, he seems to at least give implied consent to it. And while Saul at that time would have thought he was doing the right thing by upholding the Law of Moses, still, a man died.

And so if St. Paul were alive today, would anyone give him a hearing? We could imagine social media campaigns to silence him. But the beautiful reality is that St. Paul never tries to hide his past. He also does not wallow in shame. Rather, he does the Christian thing. Meaning: he owns up to his sins, repents of them, and then allows the grace of Christ to transform him into a truly new person. *His grace to me has not been ineffective*, he says, *indeed, I have toiled hard...not I, however, but the grace of God in me*. St. Paul recognizes that, of himself, he has nothing to boast about. Rather, he knows that he owes *everything* to the grace of God. It takes far more humility to be honest with yourself and to boast in Christ alone, than to hide in shame and so always futilely trying to prove your worth to others.

So let's return to my original question: do you really believe that God can use you to accomplish His perfect plan? Or deep down do you think your sins have disqualified you?

All of our readings today make it clear that God uses sinners to save the world. As we heard in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading, Isaiah was a *man of unclean lips, living among people of unclean lips*. Yet God used Isaiah in a powerful way to speak a very unpopular truth to his own people. And then in our Gospel today, Simon Peter says in his characteristically blunt simplicity: *depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!* Now this is early in Peter's life as a disciple; we don't know much about his past or the "sins" he speaks of. What we do know is that at the hour of Christ's passion, Peter denied the Lord 3 times, and then ran away from the angry mob out of fear. Jesus, with His divine foreknowledge, would have anticipated all of this. And yet he called Peter anyway. In fact, He called Simon to become "Peter": the 1<sup>st</sup> Pope. Yes, Popes have the charism of infallibility in certain circumstances. But they too make mistakes, and are sinners. And yet God still uses them in powerful ways.

And so we see Scripture leads us to the truth: Jesus desires to use us, sinners that we are, to accomplish His plan of salvation for the world. And so if Jesus doesn't hold our sinfulness against us, who are we to do just that? Why do we listen to the world, or even satan, who tries to make us wallow in our past sins? St. Paul will go on to write to the Church in Rome:

*If God is for us, who is against us? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! (cf. Rom 8:31-37)*

One of the most destructive forces in the life of the Christian is the power of shame. Now we need to feel guilt, that is, regret over *what we have done*, in order to convert us away from sin. But shame is different: shame is regretting *who you are*, at the level of your identity. Shame keeps so many people from rising to become the men and women God wants to make us into. Shame tells us: *you can never change. Your sins are the worst. Your past defines you. If others find out what you've done, they will reject you. God is ashamed of you.* Shame is a prison, and the only way out is by claiming your true identity in Jesus Christ: that I no longer need to prove to myself or others that I am a valuable person. Of my own, I am nothing; but in Christ, I have infinite value: He loves and values me enough to die for me! If we live by that truth, we won't be egotistical; rather, it makes us profoundly humble. And we won't *want* to sin, because we won't want to do anything to hurt the God who has loved us and set us free!

St. Paul reminds us in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today that *Christ died for our sins...and he was raised up on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day*. He died for us, to set us free from our sins. If new life in Christ wasn't really God's will, if His mercy doesn't really change us, then we have to ask, why in the world would He go to such depths so as to *die for us*, if He didn't *really* want us to be set free?! No, our freedom, our salvation, our new life *is* His will. Which means the only thing holding us back from this new life in Him is our own refusal to believe it.