

God Can Handle the Truth. Can You?

Admittedly I never saw the entire film “A Few Good Men” that was out nearly 30 years ago now, but you probably have seen clips of the end when Tom Cruise, playing a Navy prosecuting attorney, Lt. Daniel Kaffee, of the JAG Corps, questioning Col. Nathan Jessup played by Jack Nicholson, a marine colonel implicated in the death of another soldier in a hazing incident he ordered. Cruise’s character, in an intense questioning, causes Col. Jessup to lose it screaming “you can’t handle the truth!”

On another level, I think sometimes we can’t handle the truth about ourselves.

This week in the Gospel, we have one of the more ridiculous prayers in the Bible, that of the Pharisee. He’s praying next to a tax collector in the Temple, and he says “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous -- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.’ Then the tax collector says “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Now, I’ve never come across someone who has prayed like the Pharisee. But the problem is sometimes we do kind of do that. We can have a “holier than thou” attitude. Or we can forget about certain things in our lives and put them out of sight out of mind. No big deal, everyone does it. It’s just this one time. Who has to know?

But the truth of sin is ugly. Small sins lead to bigger sins and can get out of control easily. So what do we do about it? Pretend that it’s not there and ignore it? The tax collector shows us a better way.

There are certainly venial sins that happen in our lives and are relatively minor and do not get out of control. So it’s important not to be scrupulous which is a spiritual battle some people deal with, making a mountain out of every mole hill. We will always sin in one way or another as our lives go on, and must remember that the Eucharist takes away sin too and brings us closer to God. The key is working on overcoming all sins and striving to grow in holiness daily.

Start by doing a good spiritual inventory. Tax collectors were thieves in the time of Jesus; they took extra money than the tax was so they could live, and were also turning their backs on their fellow Jews. The tax collector gets it, he’s messed up, so he says what we still say to this day as an option for the act of contrition, have mercy on me a sinner. He’s looked at his life and realizes he needs to ask for God’s mercy to change. So don’t be afraid of the truth. We spend time hiding or trying to make others think have it all together, but God knows our secrets. Whatever it is we battle, do a good examination of conscience and look at different areas of your life. Whatever your demons are whether its struggles with sins of the flesh, drinking too heavily, gossiping too much, snapping or being angry at people, whatever it is, lay the cards on the table like that tax collector. Don’t think you don’t have any problems, because we all do. So invite God in to help.

Second, remember God's mercy is infinite. He forgives seventy times seven. So seek that out. You can go to confession every day if you'd like; Saint Louis King of France in downtown Saint Paul and Assumption have daily confessions as does the Cathedral and Saint Olaf in downtown Minneapolis. I hear confessions weekly but am always happy to hear one anytime a person needs to go. In confession we hear those words from the priest of our sins being forgiven, and it's just such a wonderful feeling to know that God's mercy is always there. Never think "what will the priest think" because the only thing we think is what a beautiful thing it is that a person is seeking God's mercy. But when you can't make confession or do not feel the need to go for a while, make a regular act of contrition as part of your own spirituality, and think about your sins during the penitential rite at Mass and before Communion, knowing that God wants you to grow closer to Him.

Lastly, learn from the tax collector and make some life changes. He's realized it's time for a change, and "goes home justified" and hopefully uses this as a springboard to change. Looking at our struggles, what are the root causes? We can learn from what caused us to make a bad decision and grow in holiness by responding to mercy by making changes, and seeking others out to help us on our journey to overcome sin.

Every time we gaze upon a crucifix we are reminded that God can handle the truth indeed, for He loves us for who we are and who are aren't. Hopefully we can handle the truth too about our shortcomings, and also understand the profound truth that each one of us is precious to God, created in His image. As Paul says in 2 Timothy from this week's second reading: "...I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen." Sin is like a lion's mouth in that it can devour us. But God will deliver us from it, if only we open our eyes to the reality of sin and the more important reality of God's answer to it in Jesus and Mercy. So don't ignore sin or fear the truth about the shadows on our soul, rather use God's mercy and love to dispel them forever.

God bless,

Fr. Paul