

One thing that is generally true of people is that we all like to look good in front of others. Everybody wants to appear smart, confident, and virtuous. None of us want to look bad.

That being the case, this little confrontation in the gospel is uncomfortable. The Pharisees, who always liked looking good in front of others, made an accusation against Jesus. They asked “*why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?*” This subtle critique was an accusation that Jesus and his disciples were ritually unclean by not keeping the traditions.

Jesus’ response was firm. He told the Pharisees that they had unclean hearts. They looked good on the exterior, but within they were unclean. The Pharisees challenged Jesus on an exterior tradition, and Jesus responded by going to the very heart of the matter. He challenged the sinfulness of their hearts. And he called them to true repentance.

There are times when it is quite necessary to directly challenge sin and call for repentance, even if it is uncomfortable. In light of this, let’s remember how Jesus taught us to pray. “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” This helps us remember to be gentle with one another, kind, compassionate, forgiving, and to do all things with a humble heart. And remember Psalm 51 that reminds us of God’s attitude toward us. “*A humble and contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn.*”

With gentleness and humility, it is important to recognize the great turmoil that we are in as a church. We need to talk about the events that have scandalized the church and the world. We heard the grand jury report from Pennsylvania. We were astounded by the recent 11 page letter from the former nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Vigano. We are confounded by news stories that depict bishop against bishop and cardinal against cardinal, even with calls to the pope to explain or to resign.

Such things stir up strong emotions among us. Righteous anger. Embarrassment and shame. Profound sadness. It may feel difficult to be a Catholic Christian right now, but thank you for coming to Mass this weekend. It may feel difficult to work in the ministries and services of the church, but thank you for your ongoing work in the church. It sure feels difficult to be a priest right now.

What then should we do? What is the next right step for us? Let us first remember that the church belongs to Jesus Christ. We belong to him. We also belong to one another. We are in this together. Jesus promised us that the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church.

Perhaps our first step must be one of humility and contrition. We need to admit that we all struggle with sin. Jesus described it at the end of the gospel today. He said that “*from within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.*” This is the sinful human condition. We all need a savior.

For my own response, I have chosen to take as a first action works of prayer, fasting, and penance. It is my own step to humble myself and seek God in this. I invite you to consider your own concrete response to what I believe is at heart the great spiritual battle of our time. Every response must begin with prayer, with asking God to show us our one next right step.

Remember the story of the apostles in the boat one night, crossing the lake. Jesus sent them ahead of him. During the night there was wind and waves against them as they rowed. And then they saw someone walking on the water. They were greatly afraid but Jesus called out to them not to fear, that it was he. So Peter asked, "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*" So Jesus said, "*come.*" We all know what happened next. Peter actually started walking on the water. Until he made a mistake. He stopped looking at Jesus and started looking at the storm. He became afraid. Then he started to sink.

This illustrates a profound temptation. The current storm in the church feels like a category 5 hurricane. The temptation is to obsess over the wind and the waves in endless news reports, blogs, opinion pages, and comment sections. Without disregarding the importance of staying informed, it is much more important to keep our eyes firmly on Jesus. It is the only way through this without sinking.

This Friday is first Friday, when we normally have exposition and adoration. You are invited, dear people, to make some time this Friday, or any day of the week, to visit the adoration chapel and put your eyes on Jesus for a while. I will be there myself on and off this Friday as a special day of prayer, fasting and penance.

What of the steps beyond that? The calls for ongoing reform are getting louder. Many good strides were taken after 2002 resulting with decisive action when abuse reports were received, and steep declines of reported abuse since then. However, there is still much more to be done in the reform of our clergy and of our church.

St. Catherine of Siena and St. Peter Damien were two great reformers of the church during times of division and scandal. They did much to deal directly with sin and scandal and call the church back to holiness. Let's ask for their intercession as our patrons in times of crisis. I have to believe that Jesus is raising up some new saints to assist in the current purification of the church. I believe that God is raising up some saints right here in this local church.

One thing is for sure. Clearing away our own sin so that we may fix our eyes on Jesus will do us all much good. And when our eyes are fixed on Jesus, then together we can hear the voice of our Good Shepherd calling us to be doers of his word. He will show us our one next right step. He will lead us to become pure and undefiled. He is calling us all to be saints. He is renewing his church. Brothers and sisters, God has chosen us to live in this time and has set this task before us. Do not be afraid to take it up. The storm may rage on, but let us fix our eyes on Jesus.