

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time – June 25, 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

She asked me to go with her when she told her father. Her father was what we might call a “hyper-Catholic” man, who had spent many years teaching her the moral law of the church.

And now, his 17 year old daughter was pregnant, and she was afraid of how he would react when she told him. So she asked me to go with her.

We went to the house. With great poise, she told him the truth. Then her father said, “You are no longer my daughter. I have taught you the moral demands of the faith. Yet you have denied your Catholic faith by getting pregnant. So now, I deny you.”

He threw her out of the house, and, until the day he died, he denied his daughter, and her beautiful child.

Being denied, being rejected, by someone you love is a terrible experience. Whether it is a father denying his daughter, or your spouse telling you that they no longer love you.

Whether you’ve been falsely accused and no one will speak the truth, or it’s your turn for a promotion and the boss turns you down again.

Whether it’s the letter telling you that you didn’t get into that college, or a friend telling you that they will never speak to you again... it is a hard thing to be rejected or denied.

Which is why, frankly, I’m not sure what to do with the last statement which Jesus makes in today’s Gospel. Jesus says, “whoever *denies* me before others, I will *deny* them before my heavenly Father.”

Really? Is Jesus willing to stand before God, Our Father, and say, “I don’t know her. I don’t know him.” Do we really have a God who is willing to deny or reject some of his own children?

The context of today’s passage makes the saying even harder. In this part of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is sending his first disciples out to proclaim his message. He starts off with words of encouragement. “Fear no one. The truth will be revealed in the end. God cares for the sparrows, so you can be sure God cares for you.”

And, in a line that means more and more to me as I get older, Jesus assures us, “Every hair on your head has been counted!”

These are beautiful words of encouragement.

But then, Jesus concludes: “If you acknowledge me before others, I will acknowledge you before my heavenly Father. But if you deny me, I will deny you.”

What do we do with Jesus' statement? Is God really like a father who is able to look at his frightened 17 year old daughter and say to her, "I deny you?"

Then... I think of St. Peter, later in this same Gospel. He denies Jesus *three* times. He denies Jesus, but after the resurrection Jesus gathers his remaining apostles, including Peter, and he sends them back out on a mission. "Go and make disciples of all nations."

That's consoling, but still confusing. In today's Gospel, Jesus says that if we deny him, he will deny us. But Peter denied him, and Peter becomes the first Pope! Is Jesus sending us mixed signals?

Maybe the answer is found in the 25th chapter of Matthew. In that chapter, people *do* get rejected and denied by God. But they are surprised by the reasons for that rejection.

In chapter 25, Jesus uses the image of the final judgment, when the 'Son of Man' separates the sheep and the goats.

At that final judgment, some are welcomed into heaven, others are separated from God. As the condemned go off, they ask why God is rejecting them, and he answers, "When I was hungry, you gave me no food. When I was thirsty, you gave me no drink. When I was a stranger, you gave me no welcome."

Maybe this is the key to understanding! Christianity is not a religion which focuses on a God who is far away, or about a savior who is tucked safely in a box.

Christianity, at its core, is the life-long discovery that God became one of us. And because God became flesh, we have the opportunity and responsibility to recognize the Lord in every person.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, people get rejected by God, not because they said the wrong words about Jesus, but because they failed to recognize and respond to the Lord who is in every person they encounter.

We are saved when we see Christ and serve Christ in EVERY person. If we love the people around us, we are loving the Lord. If we deny and reject the people around us, we are denying the Lord.

So, what sounded like a harsh saying of Jesus in today's Gospel, might in fact be an encouragement to each of us as we seek to serve the Lord.

Our words, and our deeds, *do* matter. Our decisions and actions *have* consequences. The God who watches over the smallest sparrow is waiting to see how we take care of the least of our brothers and sisters.

Yes, St. Peter denied Jesus that one night, but throughout his life Peter tried to love and serve the people that Jesus placed in his path. And this, it seems, is what God requires most.

I would like to add a personal postscript to tonight's homily. 24 years ago on June 26, I was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Walter Sullivan.

I remember being filled with a mix of emotions that day – joy, relief, excitement, gratitude for my family members, mentors and friends.

And I was also afraid. I was afraid because I knew at least *some* of my limitations. I knew my lack of patience, my selfishness, and my ego.

I knew how I could be petty and rude. On my ordination day, I knew that God had given me the great privilege of presiding at the Eucharist and preaching the Gospel, and I worried that I would not be worthy of such a gift.

24 years later, I have learned that I was right. *I am not worthy*. I mess things up. So often I don't get it right. Like every priest, like every Christian, I have the capacity to say the wrong thing. I have not always lived a life that is worthy of this calling.

But it's not about me. This is about Christ. It's not about my sin – it's about his goodness. Christians are often weak – but Christ is always strong. The church is full of fallible human beings – Christ the HEAD of the church LOVES fallible human beings.

Priesthood is an extension of baptism. In our baptisms, we are called to recognize the Lord who lives in our neighbor. So for the past 124 years, I have learned to recognize my own unworthiness; but more importantly, I have learned to recognize God's goodness, THROUGH AND IN YOU.

As we continue this celebration of the Eucharist tonight, I will be giving thanks to God for you! I thank God for my family, whose love is God's great gift to me. I thank God for my brother priests, whose good example inspires me. I thank God for each of you, who have become a blessing in my life.

Your faith, and your service, have taught me what a Christian life can look like.

Several years ago, my priestly hero, Msgr. Charles Kelly, said, "When you see a priest truly living his vocation, he should look like a man in love." I hope that, in some small way, you have caught a glimpse of Christ's love in me. Because today, from where I stand, I KNOW that I have seen our loving Lord in you, and I am filled with gratitude.