

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sept. 23-24, 2017
Fr. Michael Renninger

The sign caught my eye, since my picture was on it.

It was a sign approximately three feet wide and two feet high. My picture was on the top, and on the bottom it said: “Fr. Renninger – The Smoke of Satan.”

I drove past the woman who was holding the sign, parked my car, and started to walk into the church. Someone shouted at me: “Fr. Renninger, you are wounding the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Do not mislead God’s holy people.”

I kept walking. And said a little prayer asking God to bless my, um, ‘welcoming committee.’

So, when people ask you, “Who is your pastor at St. Mary’s?” you can tell them, “he’s the smoke of Satan!”

All of this happened Friday. I had been asked to go to a Hampton to repeat a presentation that I gave right here at Saint Mary’s. It’s a presentation about a book by Fr. James Martin.

Apparently, some folks were not happy that I would speak about this book. By the way, this book was reviewed by church officials and published with ecclesiastical permission.

Why do some folks think the book is dangerous? Because Fr. Martin has the audacity to suggest that the church needs to listen to gay and lesbian people. And he has the audacity to say that gay and lesbian people need to listen to the church. And he encourages a respectful dialog to take place, so that gay and lesbian people can know that God loves them, and the church loves them.

Shocking, isn’t it? And I dared to speak about it Friday.

That is why, dear friends, your pastor is the smoke of Satan.

As I drove home last night, two things dawned on me.

1. If I have to take some heat for daring to say that Christ and the Church love gay and lesbian people, that is ok by me. After all, Jesus regularly took heat for being the presence of the ‘wrong kind of people.’

2. I’ve been a priest for 24 years. And this is the first time that someone has gotten so upset at

my preaching that they pushed back with some harshness. Which makes me wonder – *why hasn't that happened before?*

What do I mean?

Well, starting with the Old Testament prophets, going right to Jesus himself, the Bible tells us that those who dare to speak God's truth don't get praised... they get arrested. They get punished. They get rebuked. Those who speak God's life-changing, soul-challenging message don't get praised by polite people and invited to the club. They get driven out of town, chased by angry crowds, called names, and crucified.

Now, I'm not comparing my experience to the suffering of Jesus. But if Friday night's very minor encounter was the first time that my priestly ministry has made someone that upset, then I wonder... *have I been doing it right?* Have I really been preaching in the spirit of Jesus? Or have I tried to make the Gospel, and its demands, sound... I don't know... *pleasant?*

I like to preach the pleasant passages of the Gospel, those comforting passages where Jesus says:

+ "Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest."

+ or, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

+ or, "blessed are you who mourn, for you will be comforted."

That's *pleasant*....

And if I've been focused on what's pleasant, perhaps I have robbed the Gospel parables of their power. Like today's parable. Jesus did not preach it to make us feel comfortable. He intended this parable to punch us in the gut!

In one previous homily on this parable, I pointed out that Jesus is reminding the Gentiles (that's us!) that *we* are the latecomers in God's vineyard. God called the Jewish people first. Later, God extended the call to Gentiles, people who were not Jewish, to receive the same blessing. We were not called *first*. But we are *called*, and saved. That's *pleasant*.

In another homily, I focused on the fact that this parable is about God's unfathomable generosity. Through Christ, we can *all* receive the generous gift of forgiveness, hope and eternal life. How pleasant – God is generous to all of us!

Those are some of the ways I've preached about this parable in the past. But a Scripture scholar pointed out: "*Every* believer speaks of God's generosity, but such talk changes nothing and costs nothing. If Jesus had talked only about the generous God he would not have been crucified."

If Jesus had talked only about the generous God he would not have been crucified.

They put Jesus to death, not because he was pleasant, but because his words upend every one of our convictions about how the world works, and what is worth doing in this world, and what is fair.

The people who first heard him preach this parable understood that, if they took Jesus' seriously, his words would undo everything that they worked so hard to hold on to.

The more they thought about what Jesus said, the more they realized how *dangerous* he was. They *had* to get rid of him. Not because he was pleasant... but because he was saying something *new*.

When Jesus preached this parable, he was inaugurating the kingdom of God. And in the reign of God, everyone has a job to do. We've got holy work to do!

And Jesus reminds us that, in the reign of God, it is GOD who tells us what our task is. In the parable, the vineyard owner comes to the workers and says: "this is what I want done." *God* determines what work is worth doing.

If we take that seriously, it changes our lives. When we are growing up, adults usually ask us, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" What do YOU want....

I wonder how lives would change if parents spent 18 years asking their children, "What does GOD want you to be when you grow up? What does GOD want you to do?"

Our culture tells us that the only things worth doing are the things which help us to consume, to compare, to keep up, to earn. And, by themselves, none of those things is always evil.

But when we define our *whole being* by those things, we lose any ability to listen to God when He tells us what He wants us to do.

As one writer put it, "we spend most of our lives climbing the ladder to get to the top, only to find that the ladder is leaning against the wrong building."

Jesus inaugurated a world where people trust God so fully that they always seek His direction in their lives, and find joy in doing the work that God wants them to do.

When we begin to focus more on the God who calls us, rather than on how we can get ahead of

each other, we begin to do away with rivalries, and selfishness, and our sense of entitlement.

This parable says that the God who calls us to do his work is so generous that *everyone* can find *plenty* of blessings. But we didn't kill Jesus because he told us that God is generous. We killed Jesus because we understood that God's generosity requires US to become abundantly generous.

We killed Jesus because he told us that our definition of fairness is not God's definition.

We killed Jesus because he told us that our definition of success is not God's definition, that our definition of justice is not God's definition, and our definition of 'work that's worth doing' is not God's definition.

We killed Jesus... but he would not stay killed.

We killed Jesus, but he never left us... and even now, in this Eucharist, he is with us.

Thank God that Christ is still with us. Because, sometimes we have to do what's right, even when it's not pleasant. We have to stand for the Gospel, even when others want to shout us down. We have to listen to Christ because, sometimes, Christ is the only one who can tell us what is true.

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