

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in ordinary time, 2018  
St. Mary's Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

The email came just over a week ago. I did not recognize the name of the sender. The subject line contained three words: "How dare you?"

It was an email from a woman who described herself as a life-long Catholic. She raised her children in the faith, and volunteered at her local parish.

And 15 years ago, after the initial headlines about scandals in the archdiocese of Boston, she stayed Catholic. She stayed, because she believed that the leaders of the church would fix the obvious problems, and create transparent oversight, even for bishops.

Now, she feels betrayed, again. And rightly so.

So, she is sending out her message to every priest and bishop whose email she can find. And her question is, "how dare you?"

"How dare you? How dare you betray a sacred trust? How dare you tolerate abusers in your midst? How dare you tell us who we can marry, while you covered up crimes? How dare you tell us how to treat others, when you miserably failed in your sacred duties? How dare you stand in that pulpit and challenge others to live the Gospel, when we now see how regularly you did not live it yourselves. And because of your failures, the lives of innocent ones are forever shattered.

How dare you?"

To conclude her message, she quoted Jesus in today's Gospel passage, where Jesus confronts failed religious leaders, and calls them hypocrites. Jesus condemns these failed spiritual leaders, because they are so self-focused that they are paying God lip service.

Then comes the searing judgment of Jesus. He challenges the religious leaders of his day to deal with the fact that no external religious ritual can cover up the sin in their hearts. What does Jesus say? He says, "from within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, murder, adultery, greed, deceit, licentiousness, blasphemy, arrogance. All these evils come from within, and they defile."

Jesus spoke those words to tainted religious leaders 2000 years ago. I suspect many of us agree that he could speak them to tainted religious leaders today.

We know that each and every one of us is in need of forgiveness. But we live in a time when many of us would love to send the kind of email that I received the other week, the email which

effectively expresses what so many are saying, “How dare you?”

The language of today’s Gospel passage is shockingly honest. Jesus tells it like it is. Jesus understands that, in order for healing to happen, you first have to know just how sick you are, and why.

A good doctor keeps searching until they’ve found the cause of the illness. Sometimes we don’t like it when a doctor shows us the x-ray and says, “See, right here? That is where the bone is broken.” It is hard when the doctor shows us the CT scan and points to the screen and says, “That is your tumor.” But healing only begins when we know how sick we are.

That is true medically and morally. In today’s Gospel, Jesus is ripping the bandage off the wound of the religious leaders, so that they can see just how infected they are. He challenges them to look beyond the surface, to the deep down part of themselves, where the root of sin is found. Because it is there that the root of healing can happen – for all of us.

And that’s the other thing I find fascinating about today’s passage. Mark tells us this story of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders smack in the middle of a series of miracle stories. And every miracle - both before and after today’s passage - is a miracle of healing.

Which tells me that, even as Jesus is vividly pointing out the sinful traits of the religious leaders, he is doing so because he wants to heal all that is hurting humanity. He wants to heal individuals. He wants to heal communities. He wants to heal us. *And he can.*

In today’s second reading, St. Paul gives us a clue as to how the Lord can heal even the worst of sinners, even the worst of our sins, even us, even the leaders we want to yell at.

St. Paul says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Our religious community feels defiled right now, because innocent lives were defiled. The way toward healing and justice will require much work, honest and transparent work, on many levels.

And St. Paul says, God has shown us at least part of the way forward. Individual baptized believers can strive to lead a holy life as best we can, given the circumstances we are in, given the vocation that we have.

And, St. Paul says, pure and undefiled religion consists of this: to care for orphans and widows and people who are afflicted.

A week ago, when I received that email which said “How dare you,” some things happened here at Saint Mary’s that most of you don’t know about.

On August 21, we had a funeral mass here at Saint Mary's. The person being buried that day was a woman we met through our ministry at the Women's Prison in Goochland. She came to our monthly masses at the prison, and she attended the communion services and the bible studies that we offered. Well, she died in prison. And as sometimes happens, there was no one to arrange for her to have a respectful funeral.

So our prison ministry team went into action. They asked the Commonwealth if we could arrange her funeral right here. The prison officials were confused. No one does this typically. Our ministry team kept pushing. Finally the state said yes, and we celebrated a lovely mass, and gave her Christian burial. And when a prison official asked, 'why are you doing this,' our answer was, "Because every human being has a dignity that must be honored, and this is precisely the kind of thing that church must do."

The next day, we had another funeral. This time for a lady whom we had encountered when we offered her practical help and assistance. Our parish nurses worked with her, our outreach team tried to support her. And when she died, once again, there was really no one to arrange for her burial.

So we did. We had a funeral service here, and arranged for her to be properly buried. I told a friend of mine about this, and when they found out that this lady was not even Catholic, my friend asked me, "Why are you doing all this for someone who wasn't even Catholic," my answer was the same: Every human being has dignity, and this is what the church must do.

Right now, the only headlines you'll read are the headlines that will make you want to scream, "How dare you?" And the headlines are demanding that we ask questions which must be asked, and fix problem that must be fixed, and hold people accountable.

We will do what we can, here on a local level, to be part of that crucial work.

Today I also want you to know that, even as horrible headline are happening, here at your parish, and at parishes everywhere, good people like you are doing good things for others precisely because we see that human dignity must be respected, and the work of the church must continue.

A prisoner with no one to arrange a funeral receives a lovely memorial mass. An elderly person with no one to make arrangements gets buried by your parish, simply because we know it is the right thing to do. Hundreds of children returned to school this past week, to learn each day about Jesus. Our outreach team has created a new process so that people who come to us can received dental care. Our Haiti team is planning its next medical trip. The sick are being visited. The dying are being anointed. The homeless are being sheltered. The poor are being assisted.

What kind of religious practice does God demand? Care for the orphan, the widow, the afflicted. This is the work of the church, the work which must go on, the work we will always strive to do. Most days, we will do it quietly, faithfully, out of sight. And we do it because it is what Jesus

wants us to do. And doing what He wants us to do, is the thing most worth doing.

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