

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Feb. 9-10, 2019)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

I normally don't do this, but I need to read to you a headline which just appeared on my phone. The *Times Dispatch* is reporting that our music minister, Joe Lenich, was just named Governor of Virginia!

It's been quite a week, hasn't it? Lots of people have reached out to me to talk about what's happening, and to share their deep concerns for our commonwealth and nation. I, too, am concerned.

Quite honestly, my deep concerns began with our governor's comments on late term abortion. I found his comments, and the proposed pro-abortion laws in some states, to be horrifying.

Someone once asked me, "Do you really want to make abortion *illegal*?" And I said, "What I want is to make abortion *unthinkable*." That is, with the help of Jesus, to create a world in which the dignity and value of every child is so universally recognized that it would be unthinkable to ever consider killing that child.

In the world envisioned by Jesus, the death of a child is unthinkable. In the world envisioned by Jesus, the lethal injection of a criminal is unthinkable. In Jesus' world, the possibility that a child could die of hunger is unthinkable... the possibility that a child could grow up with the impression that their sins are unforgivable – that's unthinkable.

But our world has not fully embraced the message of Jesus.

And as more *yearbooks* are discovered, and more accusations heard, a harsh tendency is being revealed. When Justice Kavanagh was being grilled by congress, I lamented that some tried to destroy a person in the present, based on an isolated accusation or action in the past. When high school students from Kentucky were accused of racism based on a short video, I lamented the tendency. And amid the headlines in Virginia right now, I continue to lament that tendency today.

Now, it has almost become a *competition* – "let's do our research, find something in a person's past. Then we'll convince people that a person's entire life can be defined by one moment, one photo." Do we really want to live in a world where a person's present and future are crushed because of their past?

And this is not just applicable to individuals, but to *communities*. Right now, our diocese is working with independent investigators to prepare and release a list of every priest or deacon who has ever been credibly accused of abusing minors. As painful as this is, we need to do it. We need to tell the truth about our past.

We belong to a church with an imperfect past. But *you are still here*, which suggests that you know that the sins – even the *crimes* – of the past, do not define our whole church in the present and the future.

The telling of the truth will help the healing to happen. It will lead to greater help for victims. We need to tell the story of what the church has done to insure that no abuser has a chance to stay in ministry. The church's experience with all of this may help our broader culture deal with the horror of abuse.

If you were listening to today's readings, you may have noticed an interesting thread which runs through each Biblical text.

In today's second reading, Saint Paul is writing to the Christians in Corinth. Paul was the one who had introduced the people of Corinth to Jesus and his Gospel. Then Paul moved on to preach in another town. And since he could not Skype with the folk back in Corinth to see how things were going, he wrote to them.

So in today's first reading, Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians to summarize the Gospel he preached to them. His message is this: REMEMBER: Jesus walked among us. He taught us, and then he died *so that our sins could be forgiven*. He rose from the dead, and now he walks right beside you, leading you home to the Father.

Paul says that this is the Gospel which was preached by ALL the great apostles.

And then he says something fascinating. Even though Paul IS an apostle, he says (and I quote): "I am not fit to be called an apostle." Why? *Because I persecuted the church*.

Stop right there. *Paul has a past*. Frankly, the truth about Paul's past was horrible. Before Paul became a Christian, he PERSECUTED Christians. He went from town to town, arresting those who believed in Jesus. He dragged them off for punishment.

And, when a Christian named Stephen was being stoned to death because of his faith, Paul was right there, encouraging those who were throwing the rocks.

How's *that* for a yearbook page?!?

In the past, Paul *arrested* Christians, *persecuted* Christians, *killed* Christians.

Then... God says to Paul: 'I want you to become a Christian, and to preach the Christian Gospel everywhere.' If Paul were alive today, I imagine that Christian media outlets would call for him to resign from ministry. "He killed Christians! He has no moral credibility!"

Apparently, in God's eyes, Paul's past did not define him. What God seems to be interested in is Paul's present and Paul's future. With God's help, Paul – the man with a sinful past – became the most effective missionary preacher in history.

In today's first reading, God calls Isaiah to preach. And how does Isaiah respond to God's invitation? He says: Um, Lord? We have a problem. "I am a man of unclean lips." In other words, Isaiah tells God – 'I have a past. I've made mistakes. I've said the wrong thing and done the wrong thing. I'm not perfect.'

Once again, God says: yesterday's sins do not destroy God's ability to change you today, and bless you tomorrow.

In the Gospel, Jesus calls his first disciples – Simon Peter, James, John. They will follow him for the rest of the Gospel.

But then something ugly happens. On the night of the Last Supper, just after Jesus is arrested, Peter is asked by some folks outside of the High Priest's palace, "Hey, aren't you a friend of the rabbi they arrested?" And Peter says, "I don't know him." He denies Jesus – three times.

And yet, after the resurrection, Jesus does not say to Peter, "how can you be my friend if you denied me three times?" No. Peter's denial is forgiven. He is changed in the present. His future is full of serving the Lord.

You may be sitting in your pew right now, asking: "So, Father Mike.... are you saying that every sinful politician should stay in office? Are you saying that people don't have to take responsibility for their actions?"

Not at all. Our faith tells us that every word we speak, everything we do, has consequences.

So, the priest who abuses a child must be permanently removed from ministry. His victims must be helped. He must face the legal process. AND – he must seek conversion, which means that, *yes*, his sins can be forgiven.

Can politicians with sinful pasts lead us in the present? Ultimately, the voters will decide.

But we, the voters, cannot be consumed by anger and judgment. We all have a past. I hope that it won't shock you when I say the following: *I was once a teenager and young adult*. No, there are no photos of me with dark makeup on my face, but there are many moments in my life that make me shudder. I thank God that no one had a cell phone camera in 1979!

I am not perfect. No one is. I need forgiveness. Everyone does. The church is not a political party. We are a community gathered by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel. Our words and deeds must reflect that Gospel.

Today's readings remind us that the God of Jesus Christ *calls people who have sinful pasts*. God called Paul, the persecutor and killer of Christians, to become a great preacher. God called Isaiah, the man who spoke unclean things in the past, to speak life-changing things in the present. God called Peter, who would deny Jesus, to become Jesus' closest friend.

This is basic Christian truth. *Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future*. God knows what could go on your yearbook page. God knows what you've done in the past. And God's response is - forgiveness of the past, a call to conversion in the present, and an invitation to a future full of hope.

Isaiah's unclean lips were cleansed when God touched them with a hot coal. (Aren't you glad we don't do that here?) But I hope you *are glad* that your unclean lips, your imperfect life, your sinful self, will be touched by the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Because this meal, touching your lips, is a meal of God's mercy.