

## Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

*November 5, 2023*

At the root of innumerable wrongs in our world is the discrepancy between word and deed. It is the weakness of churches, parties, and individuals. It gives people and institutions split personalities. This was the chief fault that the Prophet Malachi and Jesus address in today's first and Gospel readings.

**“O priests . . . . You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction . . . .”**

From our first reading we see that the Prophet Malachi doesn't mince words. But sadly we don't get to hear from him often at Sunday Mass, just twice every three years, and so this text probably isn't as familiar to you as many other Scripture passages. Like many of the prophets, Malachi looked around and wasn't happy with what he saw.

In these verses he is rebuking the priests, the religious leaders he felt were failing both by their behavior and their teachings. As a member of the clergy, each time I hear passages like these - ones that include something negative about “priests,” I can't help but think of the many ways many of us have failed you, sometimes in small ways and, as you well know, sometimes in horrendous and criminal ways. But I'm not going to use today's homily to revisit all that painful stuff, but I do hope that we are making progress toward being more faithful and more trustworthy.

In fact we do expect much from our leaders, whether they are our priests or our schoolteachers, our coaches or our politicians, our bosses or those heading up charities and other worthwhile organizations. In a very real sense, we want them to be good examples to us, examples of what it means to be a good person, a good citizen, a good neighbor, a good friend, a good employee, or a good disciple. I guess you could say that we expect our leaders to sort of teach us something, help us be better at whatever it is we are pursuing. And when they don't, it hurts. It's

disappointing. It's deflating. And if their failure is great enough, it might even make us justifiably angry.

**“O priests . . . You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction . . .”**

My dear people of God, we all know the importance of having good “teachers”. And while we most often use that word to mean the person standing at the front of the classroom, we also know that “teaching” is not limited to that setting. Parents, of course, know this well, they know that they have the primary responsibility of teaching their sons and daughters, teaching them right from wrong, teaching them how to be a good person, teaching them the things they will need to become a healthy, happy adult.

And while parents have countless opportunities to tell their sons and daughters all about these things, countless opportunities to say, “Don’t do that,” or “You better do that,” or “Go tell that kid you are sorry,” or “Don’t forget to say thank you,” or “Don’t do anything you shouldn’t do at the party,” in the end those words probably won’t carry much weight.

Well, not exactly. What I mean is - they won’t carry any weight IF the children don’t see their parents living out those very same things, acting and talking exactly the same as the children are being asked to. And that’s not always easy. What’s the saying? Talk is cheap.

Hopefully, we appreciate the few of many teachers in our midst. Good teaching as you know takes real skill. It takes passion. It takes creativity. It takes a lot of compassion and patience and persistence. And because of these many requirements, not all of us are good at it, maybe hardly any of us. And so we who are not good at it (or aren’t sure we would enjoy doing it for a living) are grateful for those who do choose such a life - a life in service of the betterment of others. Thank goodness we don’t all have to be teachers. Or do we?

Friends hear me say unkind things about other friends who aren't present. What am I teaching them? My children see me grab a week's worth of napkins, utensils, and condiments from a fast-food restaurant. What am I teaching them? A neighbor hears me tell them how to falsify financial information in order to pay less taxes. What am I teaching her? People see me never volunteering for anything, always having some sort of excuse. And even talking about the few who volunteers. What am I teaching them? My coworkers hear me gossiping and mocking just about everything and everyone. What am I teaching them? My friends hear me constantly putting people into categories and making generalizations about people. What am I teaching them?

My dear friends, whether we want to be or not, we are all teachers. Every single person is a teacher - because our lives say something. The way we talk. The things we do or don't do. The attitudes we embrace. The way we see others. All of it speaks volumes and is absorbed by those around us (consciously or unconsciously). And if we are not careful, if we are not aware of this reality, if we aren't trying to be the best people we can be, we may be doing harm, not only to ourselves, but to every person we encounter.

**“O priests . . . . You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction . . .”**

Many of us could easily remove the word “priest” from that quote and insert our own name. And so we must ask ourselves, “What am I doing or not doing, saying or not saying, that might be causing others to falter?” These are the “heavy burdens” we heard Jesus speak about in today's Gospel passage - the things we expect from others but refuse to do ourselves - the double-standard many of us sometimes adopt.

So, let's not be that person, the person who doesn't practice what he or she preaches. Rather, let's live in such a way that teaches others that we sincerely mean what we say, that our words aren't empty, but rather are expressions of the very same things we are striving to live out.

