

This past week, I was listening to a radio show which mentioned that one of these contemporary generations— millennials or Y or Z— is collectively displaying a new complex called ... wait for it ... menu anxiety. They are unable to make a decision of what to eat when they are at a restaurant. Most of us will find a couple of options on the menu that sound good, and when the server comes, just make a decision and live with it. But some individuals become so stressed that they cannot even decide what to eat. They are paralyzed. Evidently this is common enough to warrant notice by some sociologist who has coined the phrase “menu anxiety.”

I’ve witnessed this personally, and been stunned that a certain individual with whom we were dining was so torn up about what to order that the server had to come back to this person multiple times, to try to get her to choose. I was incredulous because it is just not that critical of a decision. The choice between, say, a Big Mac and a Quarter Pounder has pretty minor implications. But what happens when this person has to make a real decision? An important decision?

This morning the Word of God is calling to us to throw off our halfheartedness and to make a decision. We are being admonished to stop sitting on the fence, to stop straddling two worlds. We are called to be “all-in” for following Jesus. We are challenged to be fully committed and to stop living in this middle world where we are neither hot nor cold.

To begin, let us first return to the lesson we just read from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. Some were accusing Christ of being in league with the devil and his forces. He was being accused of working for the wrong side to try (evidently) to draw people away from Jewish faith and practice. To this accusation, Christ responds in three ways. First the Gospel says, “But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?” Christ understands that any organization, be it an army or a government or a business or a kingdom, must have a core of common convictions in order to survive attack, and to flourish. And its members must be fully committed to these convictions. Guile might work in the short term, but it introduces a seed of mistrust that chips away at the core. Eventually the institution will fail. Fragmentation of mission and motives and values leads to destruction.

The second way that Christ responds to His critics is by saying, "And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore shall they be your judges." So those who accuse Christ are maintaining a double standard. It is okay for the approved, connected, Jews to cast out demons, but it is not okay for Christ to cast them out, because Christ is an unknown. He didn't take the exorcism class at the temple and get certification from the priest in charge of spiritual warfare. He was operating out of their control. It must also be noted that the Jews were not doing a very good job of dealing with the demons. The people saw what Jesus did and were amazed. He was operating with real authority. The Jews themselves seemed to be pretty impotent when it came to this very real type of spiritual warfare, yet they obviously tried. They lacked the Spirit of God within themselves for Christ had not yet died for the sins of the world. If the exorcists of the Jews failed where Christ succeeded, then surely they must acknowledge that something greater had come. And that greater, was right there in their presence.

And this was Christ's final point: "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you." Christ as the Son of God, as God Incarnate bringing the Spirit of God, had broken into the world. The Kingdom was at hand. Nay, the Kingdom of God wasn't just at hand, but "it is come upon you." Something new is here. Christ has burst on to the scene and presents Himself to each and every person demanding a response. The choice is to follow Him, loving Him with heart, mind, and soul, receiving eternal life or to turn away from Him, suffering whatever consequences are to be had in this life and surely to suffer eternally in the life to come.

In the Gospel, Christ then tells a parable of a strong man guarding his house and goods. What is Christ saying here? Well, the devil is the strong man, and his goods were shut up in his world where he ruled. But no longer. Christ the stronger man is here, and carries away the spoils that the devil thought were so secure. The souls that had been oppressed by demons, that were safely within the influence of the devil, were being freed by Christ. The demons were being forcibly cast out and could not resist the power of God.

But then Christ tells another rather obscure parable of a person who is freed from demonic oppression. The demon wanders around without finding a place to exist and then returns to the person from which he was previously ejected bring seven other demons with him. Christ says the last state of this person is worse than the first. So what is going on here in this story?

The key here is the introductory sentence before this story where he says, "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth." What Christ is warning against is our tendency to be only halfhearted in following Him. If a person is baptized, freed from the oppression of this world, but then chooses not to follow Jesus, does not pursue life in the body of Christ, he will become spiritually worse off than if he never converted.

The point here is that being halfhearted in our spiritual life will leave us on precarious ground. There is no middle ground in the pursuit of Christ. "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth." Jesus is telling us to make a choice and then follow through in full and hearty obedience. He is telling us to throw off our apathy and to embrace with all of our strength the new life which has been granted us in Christ. We have the help of God to live faithfully every day, but if we do not avail ourselves of this help, if we ignore the opportunities for discipleship and formation that are presented to us, if we are disobedient to God's commands, then we must bear the responsibility for the spiritual deadness and oppression that we invite to ourselves. As Christians, if we tolerate sin in our lives, if we hide our struggles, then we are abusing the life of Christ within us. Repeated cycles of obedience and disobedience will diminish the life of Christ within us.

This morning's Epistle also reinforces the message that Christ has for us in the Gospel. In it St. Paul says, "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour." This is followed later by, "you are children of the light, walk as children of the light." In the context of such statements, St. Paul is telling us to throw off all of the pet sins that we tolerate in our lives. Make your decision, be sold out for Christ, and live for Him. "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient. ... for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience." Having tasted the grace of God, do not then turn back from Him for as these cycles continue, one is invariably led further and further away from God. We train ourselves to think that it really doesn't matter if we don't live according to the faith which we have professed. Abusing God's grace will not end well for us.

So how do we break away from our complacency? How do we turn that corner so that we

never again fall back into our old habits of selfishness and disobedience? Besides engaging in the spiritual warfare of Lent, let me suggest three things that will help to break down the cycle of disobedience to which we are so prone. First, make an intentional decision to follow Christ. Live with intentionality and dedication and prioritize obedience to God. This is the most important thing. Christ is the strong man, He has spoiled the devil's house. Be on the winning team. What influences shape your imagination? Cast out those demons, cut the bad influences off, and pursue the love of Christ. Spend time in prayer, focused upon the blessings that you have in Christ. Admit to yourself that if you do not have a vision of who you want to be, then you will surely not become that person.

Secondly, practice confession. Hidden sins will hound your spiritual growth. In the epistle, St. Paul calls these the works of darkness for they are hidden, and he admonishes us, "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reproved are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light. Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."

Now confessing our sins privately, like we do in our corporate worship, is very important; but we escape accountability if those sins are not revealed to a fellow believer. You need to have a confessor, someone with whom you can be completely honest, someone to whom you can reveal your heart and from whom you can receive counsel and accountability. The sacrament of confession is recommended, but many people have spiritual directors, mature and wise Christian who can give us insight and suggestions for exercises to facilitate growing in Christ. The micro groups that are forming are also a means to find some close connections and be able to share our struggles. Whatever your particular preference is, please understand that we need to take our sin seriously.

Finally, and most obviously, obey the Word of God. You can decide to obey with your mouth, but deciding with your life is the real deal. I don't have too much concern regarding what you say you believe. I am more concerned with what you show you believe. We know what we really believe through how we live. So walk the talk. Pursue worship with the people of God, pursue biblical knowledge and understanding, make God your priority in all things.

As catholic Christians we have the grace of God given us in the Church through the sacraments – particularly Baptism and Holy Communion - but also the minor sacraments such as confession mentioned earlier. These are vital to growth in Christ, but they are not everything. Samuel confronted King Saul with this exact point when He said, “to obey is better than to sacrifice.” We have a similar, but cryptic, message from Christ this morning at the end of our gospel lesson. We read, “And it came to pass, as (Christ) spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.” The woman is talking about birth and sustenance. Baptism is our new birth in our mother, the Church. The Eucharist is our nourishment from Her. Surely those who are born of water and the spirit and those who are strengthened by the Body and Blood of Christ are blessed indeed. But this avails us little if we do not hear the Word of God, if we do not heed the Word of God.

Do we heartily desire God or are we content to live with one foot in two worlds? Do we think that we can do a little church on the weekend, but live however we want during the week? We might be too accustomed to our lukewarm patterns of behavior. If so, may today be the last day that you live in such a manner. Do not treat the sacrifice that Christ made for you with apathy. Do not take His love for you for granted. Take stock of your lives here and now and renew your commitment to living for Christ. Be no longer paralyzed by indecision, but let the light of Christ illuminate your life. Let the sacrament of which we are about to partake truly be a covenant renewal – not just that Christ assures us of His good favor towards us, but that we would truly go forward from our worship this morning seeking to do all of those obedient and good works that He has prepared for us to walk in. Halfhearted no more, may we gratefully receive His love, and then reflect it into the world through fully dedicated and spirit-empowered obedience to God.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.