

21A 2023

When Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, he announces the good news, the truth that we are all the beloved children of God.

We are already all that we need to be.

When the chief priests and elders hear this wonderful news, they are . . . greatly upset.

Truth has a way of cutting through the fog of existence and piercing our core.

For those who can accept it, it brings a sense of joy and relief.

We celebrate the fact that, despite what our ex might have told us, or our high school gym teacher, or our first supervisor, or maybe even our own parents, we are beautiful just the way we are, just as God made us.

(In the course of one day, my first supervising priest called me a dandy, a sap, and said that he hated people like me that needed everything to be in order.

I told him that it was good to know where I stood, and he replied that he did not mean anything by it.)

If we feel shame, if we have allowed others to make us feel less than, the gospel can cause a powerful, negative response because it challenges the lies that we have chosen to believe in order to compensate for our imagined inadequacy.

Simply put, when we fail to understand that we are good enough from the start, we then seek ways to prove ourselves in the eyes of others.

We fear losing that sense of superiority because we are convinced that that is all there is.

A friend of mine in Louisiana asked me why I thought all of his elected representatives cling to office until they die.

I responded that their political career is probably all they have that gives them some sense of meaning in a world that, for them, is otherwise meaningless.

They do not know the gospel, the good news that we are children of God.

They may even call themselves Christians, but they do not yet really know the gospel.

That is OK.

We are all works in progress, but we need to be aware of what drives people to do these things so that we do not get caught in other people's delusions, such as when they try to frighten us into voting for them.

The very fact that the chief priests and elders do not spontaneously and joyfully embrace the truth of Jesus' words is evidence that they are motivated not by the truth, not by the good news, but by what others think.

The opinions of others control what they desire.

That is a formula for a never ending treadmill of self-delusion and anxiety.

We become pulled this way and that by the shifting opinions of people who are reacting to the opinions of people who are reacting to the opinions of other people, *ad infinitum*.

We lose all grounding and are blown about the winds.

“I need to paint my walls gray, no white, no, antique tones, no, pastels are in! What will people think of me if I have the wrong color walls?”

In the early twentieth century, it was thought to be inappropriate for women to smoke cigarettes.

One day, a large group of young women pushed their way into a parade and lit up cigarettes.

This “protest” was hailed by some in the press as a valiant demonstration for freedom.

Others branded the women’s behavior as an attack on the moral fiber of our nation.

People took sides (the culture war is not new, you see), but in the end, cigarette smoking spread among women, which is exactly what Lucky Strike had wanted when it paid a public relations expert, Edward Bernays, to organize the “protest.”

Lucky Strike had realized that, with the right manipulation, they could achieve a 50% market expansion.

Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, also promoted Enrico Caruso’s career, advised auto makers to introduce new models every year, and convinced people to wear more green so that people would not avoid Lucky Strike’s green packaging.

Why do we allow ourselves to be convinced by people who are manipulating our desires?

We are looking for ways to be admired, to be envied, and they convince us what to do to accomplish that.

They convince us, in other words, to like these because others like them and others are convinced to like them because we like them, or so everyone assumes.

We are freed from this when we grasp the wonderful gospel that we are already beautifully made, already all that we need to be.

We had a stimulating conversation in the spiritual formation group about the nature of faith and freedom.

Fran Salone-Pelletier offered a most wonderful definition of sin as *not being ourselves*.

When we say that we are freed from sin, we mean that we are free to be ourselves, no longer easily manipulated.

Working towards the freedom to be ourselves is a significant part of our lifelong path.

It happens step by step as we begin to let go of our desires and affirm ourselves.

We then become able to be more present to others.

The chief priests and elders are unaware that what we truly want is to be respected for who we are.

They want to be admired not for who they truly are, but for their positions.

Because of this, peddlers of propaganda can sell them almost any “truth” by convincing them that it will allow them to maintain their social position.

Once the majority are convinced that the majority are convinced, it becomes a reality that is a prison.

Recognizing that the chief priests and elders have made themselves the slaves of desire,

Jesus refuses to answer their question about who gave him the authority to teach.

He knows that it is merely an attempt to preserve their status by undermining him in public opinion.

The reality is, unlike the chief priest and elders, no earthly person gave Jesus his authority.

It is the truth of his words themselves, his honest relationship with his father, that gives him the authority.

Simply put, his words have their own authority.

Jesus therefore responds to their question with a question that reveals the actual values of the chief priests and elders.

He asks them to answer whether the baptism of John was from heaven or was it of human origin.

They will not answer because they will either be revealed as hypocrites (because they chose not to get baptized) or will offend the people (because they dismiss John as a fraud).

The chief priests and elders are not free to be themselves, to voice the truth.

Jesus, on the other hand, is free to call them out.

He tells them that, because they refuse to affirm the baptism of John, they will get to the kingdom of heaven after the prostitutes and the tax collectors who joyfully greet the truth that God loves them.

The chief priests and elders have more work to do, in other words, than the prostitutes and tax collectors.

The world is full of manipulation of our desires, but we can be free if we want.

The church is a place that eschews delusion and manipulation, but instead offers affirmation of the truth of God's love.

This is what makes the church special, different.

It is not that we are perfect, but that we recognize that from the outset we are loved, have nothing to prove, and seek to return that love.

We are working our way towards freedom, towards the kingdom of heaven as we let go of the illusion of desire and embrace God.

To my knowledge, no other place outside of religion offers that.

We may choose to position ourselves as good in the eyes of others by saving puppies or doing some other sort of public stunt, but true freedom is found when we let go of needing to please others and just enjoy the fact that God loves us all.

That transforms us, frees us from sin so that we no longer seek to seem, but can share that love with others.