

MARCH 5TH

"My father," they said, "if the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it?"

Reading this account of Naaman from the Second Book of Kings makes me think of Jesus's parable of the two sons, one who says he will do what his father wants and then doesn't, and the other who says, "No," but then goes and does it. We may fight God and want to do things our way, but it is when we finally give in and submit to a God far more powerful than us that great things happen. We say we love Him and trust Him, but do we really? Or are we constantly clamoring for the driver's seat in the car instead of the passenger's seat?

And how ironic that Naaman expected something big and grand, rather than the most basic of actions to have his leprosy healed. If he would have been asked of a grand gesture or action, he would have followed through. But a simple action of bathing in the Jordan River...why, that seems far too easy! But in the same way, God doesn't always expect big and grandiose things from us. It is in the small, humble workings of our lives that God does His best work.

*~~Joel*

MARCH 6TH

“Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair.”

From time to time in my ministry here at JPPII (and during my stints in Ohio and Florida), I have the blessing of being able to interact with kindergarteners and 1st graders. These are truly unique people, and they have an innate sense of fairness and justice. They know the difference between right and wrong, and they are very quick to point out when something is not up to snuff. You can't bring in cupcakes for only half of the class without feeding the other half, and teams at recess need to be divided up in such a way that the talent is balanced across the two teams, lest you hear a barrage of “These teams are unfair!” and risk half of your participants simply quitting the game and playing something else.

The wicked servant in Jesus's parable today is truly one of the most loathsome people in the entire New Testament. To be forgiven of such a large debt and then to turn around and mistreat a fellow servant who owed much less? Despicable. Scary is the fact that while this is an obvious example, it's easy to fall into that trap ourselves. As adults, we rationalize many things. There are many times where we are perfectly happy to receive mercy from somebody else and do not extend it ourselves. We cut somebody off in traffic because we didn't see them in our car's blind spot or were distracted by a passenger in the back seat, but boy...don't let anybody else do that to us! Let us try to become more merciful people during this season of Lent--lest some kindergartener call us out for it!

*~~Joel*

MARCH 7

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”*

Today’s readings are about law. Rules. Many of us (me included!) have a rebellious streak and hate being told what to do! And certainly there is wisdom in not only knowing a law, but also applying a law or a rule to a circumstance. These things don’t occur in a vacuum. Murder is a law...but then there’s self-defense or just warfare. Speeding is a law...but going 30 in a 25 is still better than going 100 in a 45. And then again, when your wife is in labor, and you’re trying to get to the hospital as fast as you can, very few police officers would blame you for breaking this law. Traveling is a rule...but is applied differently to an Indiana University basketball player than it is to one of our Bidy Ball players here at JPII. (LOTS of traveling in K-2 basketball games...but maybe you only call it if there’s not an attempt to dribble and they “Fred Flintstone” it!)

Laws and rules are taught to us for our own benefit. Often rules are stricter for younger children than for teenagers. Would you trust your 17-year-old to operate the stove? How about your 4-year-old? The ancient Jews were a primitive people, in a “grade school” type relationship with their God. As history moves along, we go from a firm “Thou shalt not kill,” to Thomas Aquinas’s Just War Theory. We start to understand the underlying reasons for God’s laws and how they can be applied to daily living. Jesus and the letter-of-the-law Pharisees had their go-arounds about healing people on the Sabbath. The Pharisees knew the law; Jesus knew how to *apply* it.

*~~Joel*

MARCH 8

*“Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.”*

Oh, Jeremiah. How true are your words! I was a history teacher down in Florida during the 2016 Presidential Election, and I think those words of Jeremiah applied to both parties, whether you consider yourself more of a Republican or more of a Democrat. Honesty is such a hard thing to come by these days. Fox News will tell you one thing; MSNBC and CNN will tell you another. In this Internet age, it is easier than ever to access information--and harder than ever to know whether the information you're accessing is accurate.

For those of you that are sports fans, do you remember the big steroid scandal involving baseball in the early 2000's? Name after name came out, and the denials took many forms. Barry Bonds nonchalantly reminded everybody that he'd never actually failed a steroid test. Roger Clemens's army of lawyers put out every aggressive stance they could. Rafael Palmeiro testified before Congress, vehemently wagging his finger that he never took steroids--and then promptly failed a steroid test. Sammy Sosa magically forgot how to speak English. And then there was Andy Pettitte, who was about as honorable as anyone could have possibly been in such a situation, admitting that he got caught, apologizing for his choices, and yet refusing to throw his teammate, Roger Clemens, under the bus.

There is little we can control of what goes on around us. We cannot control how honest our politicians and baseball players are, or our neighbors for that matter. But we can be honest ourselves. For those that are married, you cannot control whether or not your spouse is faithful to you, but you can certainly be faithful yourself. Jeremiah's frustrations with the Jewish people as a whole certainly didn't apply individually to *every single* Jewish person. There had to be some, even a small minority, that were still trying to live out the covenant with their God. Let us strive to be like those exceptions to the rule. Being honorable. Being faithful. Following God's command. And we can strive to return that faithfulness and honor, one person and one act at a time.

*~~Joel*

MARCH 9

*“Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”*

What a genius idea by Jesus to answer the “What is the greatest commandment?” question off the cuff. Or did he? As a child, I always thought that this was one of Jesus’s most clever answers. In Matthew’s version of this, it’s a Pharisee trying to test Jesus with this question. And I always considered this as one of the ways that Jesus showed how smart he was. But while that “how smart he was” idea definitely applies to Jesus’s handling of the paying taxes to Caesar question (“give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, give to God what is God’s”), this actually does not apply here.

Jesus got this answer from Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy. It’s a very famous prayer called the *Shema*. Moses instructs the Israelites to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” He then tells the Israelites to teach this commandment to the next generation, “drilling it into your children.” And so they did. The Hebrew transcription of the *Shema* could be found on every Jewish doorpost, reminding anyone who entered or exited the Jewish home of this commandment. (This doorpost version of the *Shema* was called a *mezuzah*.) The *Shema* could also be found in little black boxes that were to be worn by observant Jews on their foreheads or their arms; these black boxes were called *phylacteries*. If you prayed this prayer every time you entered or left your home or saw somebody wearing a *phylactery*, how many times do you think you would say that prayer in a day? More often than you say a Hail Mary when you pray the rosary?

Jesus had many original thoughts and clever ideas. This is not one of them. This rolled off his tongue just as easily as the Our Father rolls off of ours. This answer comes from Mary, teaching a young child how to recite an ancient Jewish prayer every time He left or returned to His home in Nazareth. Good job, Mom!

~~Joel