

Sermon for the 21st Sunday After Pentecost, 2018

Dearly beloved,

"Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers and principalities, against the rulers of the world of darkness, against the spirits of iniquity in the heavenly places." So does St. Paul say in the epistle for today's Mass, and so we know it to be in the midst of the current scandal in the Church. The devil is the sure source of the evil carried out by the clergy and especially our prelates, for only he can convince men who once loved the Church, at least on their ordination day, to now seek to destroy her from within; only he can persuade such men that their sins are not really sins, that they should lie and dissimulate and that the lies will never be exposed; only the devil can convince such men that they will escape eternal damnation even if they do not repent. The plan to destroy the Church is of the devil; he found willing accomplices, but he was and is the mastermind, and we should bear this in mind no matter what happens next. The Church is the ark of salvation, the priest acts *in persona Christi* to offer Mass and forgive sins, the Pope is the rock against which hell will not prevail, and so quite naturally Satan hates all of it and wishes to undermine it and confuse and dishearten all who know the truth and strive to live according to it.

But this teaching of St. Paul is operative on more than just the global level; it also applies to our individual lives, and that is made evident in the Gospel parable. The protagonist of the parable made two significant errors which led to his damnation, and they are two sides of the one truth: our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of the world of darkness.

Just as the devil has worked hard to divide the Church, so he works to divide our families and our communities. He loves nothing better than to create dissension and distrust between husband and wife, parents and children, priests and their people. The main character in the parable saw his fellow man as an enemy, a person whom he had to throttle in order to reestablish his relationship with God. In fact, it was the devil who encouraged him to harass his friend and create enmity with him, because that served as a larger plan to affect the man's damnation. We too often fall prey to the fallacy that we can be saved by our own efforts, and this in two ways, which reflect the two mistakes the man made. First, we think we can be saved without other human beings. Second, we think we can be saved without God.

The devil tries over and over again to make us think that the person or persons to whom we are bound by blood or vow are actually a hindrance to our salvation. We would be so much better off if only they would change, if only they would grow in virtue or wisdom or holiness, then life would be easier and I would finally prosper. Instead I labor under the burden of this person. How long do I have to endure this? This line of thinking then leads us to strangle our neighbor, trying to exact the pittance they owe us, while we overlook the fortune we owe God.

When St. Augustine wrote his rule of life for himself and the monks living with him, he began the Rule in what seems a curious way. He said that the reason the monks had come together was to live in unity in the house. Not grow in holiness, not fast and pray, not accomplish great works for the Church, but to live in unity. Augustine understood that unity, real unity in Christ, is the mark of holiness and a bulwark against which Satan fights in vain. The Latin words Augustine used to describe this could also be translated as living harmoniously: *unanimiter* and *concorditer*.

Based upon this insight of Augustine, the image of an orchestra is a helpful one when considering how Christian unity actually works in a household, a religious community, a business or a group of friends. There is a goal to be achieved: we are all striving for union with God and holiness of life. And yet each of us strives for holiness in a distinct way and brings different gifts and weaknesses, virtues and vices to the common endeavor. It is music with a purpose and a goal, but it is achieved by a variety of instruments, each adding its own voice to the whole: the trombones that are courageous but always flat; the percussionists patient but lacking enthusiasm; the cellos playing perfectly but a bit too proud of that.

In the orchestra that is life there are two principal temptations that arise due to our place in the whole. For those who play first violin—husbands, parents, superiors, managers, older siblings—there is the temptation to force the other musicians to take on the characteristics of the violin, to play in unison rather than harmony, to play with perfect pitch even if it means breaking the spirit of the one playing out of tune. This is not right: yes, the first violin gives the pitch to the rest of the orchestra, yes, it sets the standard for tempo and dynamics, but it is not the only instrument in the group; it is one of many and it is called to lead rather than compel, foster love rather than fear, and humble itself so others may be encouraged to grow and mature. There are not just violins and all other instruments, known as non-violins; there are French horns and trumpets, timpani and oboes, violas and even the triangle. There is one who exalted himself above others and thought his way was the only way, who said, “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, . . . I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.” Though the devil has his comrades in evil, the fallen angels, he despises them and merely uses them to attempt to achieve his purpose.

The other temptation is more subtle, for it belongs to the one who plays the tuba in life—the wife, children, the employee, the novice, younger siblings, the subprior. The tuba is very necessary to the orchestra, though it is surely less glamorous than the violin. But because God has made it such that the violin leads and the tuba follows, the tuba can experience the desire to do better, to write, as a friend of mine once did, a solo for unencumbered tuba. But a tuba is good because it is a tuba; it is not good when it acts as if it is a violin. The pride of a tuba is not to despise its subjects and lord it over them, but to second-guess the violin, to murmur under its breath, to complain to others that if only it were first violin, then the orchestra would be truly grand. Remember that according to Tradition the devil rebelled because he objected to God’s plan for the universe, especially the inclusion of man in beatitude.

The prideful violin and tuba both throttle the other instruments just as the man in the parable did, but from different angles. Both forget that it is not they who are directing the orchestra, but God. It is God who puts people into our lives, who sends us our spouse or our siblings, our children, our novices, our superiors, our bosses and employees. It was an adage among the desert Fathers that if one was soft, lazy and gluttonous, that monk should seek a hard and even cruel father to place himself under. We do not necessarily benefit from having persons in our lives like to us in temperament and virtue and desires; we often grow more when people who are contrary to us live with us and work with us, because it draws from us the virtues of patience and charity and longsuffering and courage.

It is God who wishes to unite mankind; it is the devil who wishes to divide us. And so every time we allow pride to intervene in our relationships with others, when we strangle our fellow in order to exact a supposed debt from him, rather than pleasing God, we please the devil. He applauds when we tear others down in our speech or our thoughts, for he knows that by creating division, he will win our souls; he will separate us from the very ones with whom God willed that we should work out our salvation. On the other hand, the remedy to our pride is simple and pleasing to the Lord: to see the good in others, to rejoice in their strengths, to overlook their faults, to pray for the other person each time we are tempted to despise or to complain. The spiritual giant is not the one who throws off his yoke and liberates himself, but the one who keeps struggling to love even when the yoke seems too heavy to bear.

A final point: the Collect speaks of the Church as being God’s family. In a family, there are sometimes cases where a certain member not only has character flaws and vices, but is abusive, and therefore the family members are obliged to separate from that person. Many of our bishops and priests have been abusive fathers, not only in horrible ways which have finally been exposed, but also in promoting heresy, in neglecting their duty, in countenancing moral depravity, in destroying the liturgy, in furthering their own cause; in short, in directing the orchestra rather than playing in it. These men need to go. But we ought not abandon them to the torturers. These men will never be able to repay Christ for the debt they have incurred, but neither will we be able to pay our own debt.

The point of the parable is not that there are some of us who are more righteous and therefore owe God very little and have the right to strangle our neighbor, but that each of us is in the same boat—if it were not for God’s mercy, we would all be handed over to the devil for all eternity. The fall of a priest or bishop, especially if he is to all appearances unrepentant, is something over which to weep, not gloat. Perhaps our tears will win their conversion. In his own battle against the status quo, the prophet Jeremiah once said to the priests, “Hear and give ear; be not proud, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God before he brings darkness, before your feet stumble on the twilight mountains, and while you look for light he turns it into gloom and makes it deep darkness. But if you will not listen, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive.” These are the words of a saint. May we strive to imitate him, and in so doing save our souls and the souls of other sinners for whom Christ has shed His blood.