

An undivided Heart

Homily for September 17-18, 2022
25th Sunday Ordinary Time

When we serve the wrong master, or when we try to serve two masters, being followers of Christ on the inside and followers of worldly fashions on the outside, we end up living a divided, frustrated life.

When I was in high school the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was a popular novel to read in grade 11. The story takes place in a small town in Alabama in the 1930s, where relations between blacks and whites were marked by racism. This was long before the civil rights movement. The drama centres on the attorney Atticus Finch, a widower with three school-aged children. The county judge has assigned him the unpopular task of defending in court Tom Robinson, a black man who has been falsely accused of crimes against a white woman. The whole town resents the fact that Atticus Finch, an upstanding white citizen, accepts the assignment. They think it is beneath his dignity to defend a black man accused of such crimes. But Atticus takes the case anyway, in spite of warnings and threats. Not only does he suffer for it, but his children do too. The reason he gives for doing the right thing regardless of the risks is very interesting. He puts it concisely in a conversation towards the end of the book. He says, "I can't live one way in town and another way in my home."

That's what it means to have an undivided heart. That was the secret to his integrity, his strength of soul, and his peace of mind. Jesus wants us to have undivided hearts, strength of soul, and peace of mind. He wants us to serve only one master – God.

The parable that we heard today is all about serving God with an undivided heart. Although it is hard to understand because it centres on a godless man. As is true with all of Jesus' parables, he is telling us something that has a shock value.

When he talks about the unjust steward, he is like the financial officer for a rich land owner, he is not commending this guy for cooking the books. No the point is that even though he is about to be fired from his post, his heart is undivided in securing his temporal future. By reducing the amount the people owed his boss, they would remember him and welcome them into their homes, when he was fired. To be shrewd does mean that he is wise. He knows how to make choices that serve himself.

The point Jesus is making is there are people who are worldly with no awareness of God who are more focused on how they are living in the present world, than are those who are children of light.

So when Jesus says at the application of the parable. "I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into eternal homes" what does he mean? He is stressing that in this world there are so many ways people will use wealth and the temporal resources of life that are self-serving. This the teaching in our first reading from Amos where the line "we will measure out less and charge more and tamper with the scales" represents this mind set. What Jesus is saying in a subtle way is that we are to use all of the resources of this world in a way that is godly. We are not serving both God and money.

Rather our lives are characterized by being faithful in the small things, so in turn we will be faithful in the big things of life.

This is why Atticus Finch is such a good illustration of the parable's point. He used the corrupt and unjust Alabama legal system to serve Tom Robinson as best he could. Even though the story ends unjustly and Tom Robinson is shot and killed.

Because of Atticus' integrity when Tom Robinson and Atticus Finch meet in heaven there will be a genuine and sincere reunion because Finch chose to live a selfless life here below that represents what it will be like in the eternal habitations. He lived in this world of divided hearts with a singleness of purpose.

Now as was true for Finch in the 1930s today's culture strongly encourages us to live self-centered lives instead of Christ-centered lives.

Therefore for us to be "trustworthy in the small matters" of life, so that we can be trustworthy in the great ones, we have to make a conscious effort. We have to remember that the small choices we make each day either draw us closer to Christ or push us away from him. If we get sucked into a gossip session, we are weakening Christ's Kingdom. If we go the extra mile to help a relative or a colleague in need, we are strengthening it. The key is to remember that, to create a habitual mentality that sees daily life as an arena in which we are battling for or against Christ.

Another word for that habitual mentality is faith. Our Christian faith is more than just a list of beliefs; it is the way we see the world. Since faith is a virtue, we can help grow by exercising it. And one of the best ways to exercise it is by developing a disciplined prayer life. Taking even ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes at night to speak with Christ about what is important to him and what is important to us does wonders for keeping our faith in shape.

This in turn can help us to keep our hearts undivided. Consider the following. One way to keep our hearts undivided is to plant little visual reminders in key places. Your rosary can be a reminder that our little daily decisions and actions are like little beads on the rosary: together they help hold the Kingdom together. Those of us who have offices can keep a small cross or crucifix on the desk, reminding ourselves that our work, when we do it responsibly and offer it to Christ, can be a channel for God's grace to spread in the world.

Here is an idea I read about this week: Take a few minutes every Sunday to come up with a phrase that will remind you of what struck you most during Mass - maybe a word from the readings, the homily, or something that came to you while you were praying after communion. Then consider using that phrase all week. You may put it in his screen-saver at work. Program it into text messages that you can send to yourself or write it on a note card to use as a bookmark.

It's a way to make sure that he keeps focused on serving Christ in all his day-to-day activities.

In the Old Catholic countries of Europe, you still see what are called "wayside chapels" along the country roads. These are wooden crucifixes or statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary erected under a protective wooden awnings. They were placed at intersections or roadsides as a way to remind travelers of their true destination, and to encourage them to pray as they traveled.

This week, Jesus wants us to experience afresh the meaning that comes from serving him in everything we do with an undivided heart. Let's erect some wayside chapels so

that in the words of St. Paul from today's second reading we may lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and dignity for this is right and acceptable in the eyes of God.