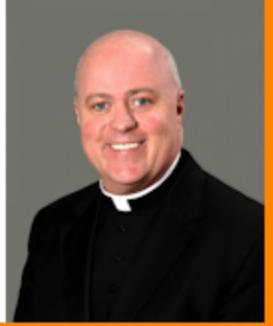


Father Chapin's Homily



November 4, 2018 – GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Today we find ourselves in the 12th chapter of Mark.

And we pick up where we left off last week, which as you may recall was Blind Bart and the deeper meaning was all about blindness.

And if you recall there were a lot of blind people in that STORY.

Maybe not physically but certainly spiritually blind.

Which, of course, describes a lot of us.

Now getting back to blind Bart, as he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was coming he somehow was able to SEE him not as just a Healer but as Messiah.

When he cried out he said Jesus Son of David.

That is Messianic language.

There were many others in the crowd that day.

They had a casual interest, but they could not SEE HIM.

They saw him as a great TEACHER.

They saw him as a miraculous healer.

And MAYBE even whispers of Messiah.

But of course, they had a whole different understanding of what a Messiah would be.

But a SAVIOR sent by God not so much.

THAT they did not see.

And you know ... it is ONE thing to be blind and know it.

But it is quite another thing to be blind and THINK you can see.

If you are lost and you know it, you can try to find your way home.

But what happens when you're lost, and you don't even know you're lost?

Welcome to our world.

Crowds of people marching to espouse with GREAT passion what they believe.

And you hear some of it and think they can't POSSIBLY believe what they are saying.

But they do.

And despite how much evidence might be staring at them in the face refuting their claim, it doesn't matter THIS as this is what they believe.

That is our world.

Blindness completely convinced that it sees clearly.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

He begins his letter with passionate praise.

He described how he had heard of the PROFOUND faith and love within your community.

For this reason, ever since I have heard of your FAITH in our Lord Jesus and your LOVE for ALL PEOPLE I have not stopped giving thanks for you and remembering you in my prayers.

He talks about how once they were FAR AWAY but HAD BEEN BROUGHT NEAR by the BLOOD OF CHRIST.

Paul talking about the Church as the Body of Christ.

And how the UNITY OF FAITH was GROWING a community in LOVE.

In OTHER words, these people GOT IT.

Ephesus was the place to be.

They are one of the FIRST churches and they represent the Body of Christ filled with the HOLY SPIRIT and FAITH as they GROW IN LOVE.

OK.

Now let's leave that for a moment and fast forward in time to a later book called Revelation.

This book was written by the Apostle John as he is illuminated by a risen Jesus.

John writes to this same church.

And this isn't all that long after.

But things have CHANGED.

It starts out good.

I know your deeds and have heard of your works and perseverance.

I know you cannot tolerate wicked people and you detest the NICOLAITANS who claim to be Apostles and are not and have you found them false.

You have persevered and endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary.

So far, pretty good.

But he continues.

BUT I hold this against you.

You have forsaken the love you had at first.

Consider how far you have fallen!

Repent and do the things you did at first.

If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.

But you have this in your favor.

You hate the practice of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.

Whoever has ears let them hear what the SPIRIT says to the church?

WOW!

What happened?

He is talking to the FIRST-BORN church.

And CLEARLY it has lost its way

This is STRONG language.

You have forsaken the love you had at first.

First love. You were all fired up.

Consider how far you have fallen.

Repent and do the things you did at first.

And if you do NOT REPENT, I will come to you and remove the lampstand from its place.

Which sounds bad.

But at least they got ONE thing going for them.

They hate the NICOLAITANS and God hates them too.

So, let's start there.

Who are these people?

WHO are the NICOLAITANS?

Well... the NICOLAITANS were followers of Nicolas who was a false prophet.

You hear about them in the book of Acts.

They would mix THE pagan rituals of Baal with Christianity.

They would sacrifice animals to idols and eat it.

They would commit fornication openly with NO apology.

They would mix SPIRITUAL words with EVIL deeds.

They would have idolatrous feasts and bring them into the church.

Remember how we talked about the fact that there are TWO worlds?

There is GOD'S world and then there is THE world.

And they were drinking from both cups because it was comfortable.

Jesus often refers to Satan as Prince of the World.

First Corinthians says ...

You cannot drink from the Cup of the Lord and the Cup of the Devil.

You cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and at the Table of the Devil.

The NICOLAITANS I'm sure were good people.

Probably started out with the best of intentions but somewhere they had lost their way.

And like I said it is one thing to be blind and know it but quite another to be blind and think you can see clearly.

You have forsaken the love you had at first.

Consider how far you have fallen.

Repent and do the thing you did at first.

And if you do NOT REPENT, I will come to you and remove the lamp stand from your place.

What is the lampstand?

Well we find the lamp stand in my favorite chapter of the Bible.

John 14 ...

If you love me, you will keep my commandments and I will ask the father to send you another advocate. The spirit of truth. A spirit which the world does not know because it neither sees it nor knows it, but YOU know it because it remains with you and will be IN you.

In other words, if you love me I will give you a LAMP STAND that will light your way.

To know intuitively EXACTLY what to do in each given situation.

Advocate is a legal term, it means lawyer.

Think of it as your SPIRITUAL LAWYER 24/7 giving you counsel and direction.

That is the promise of the Holy Spirit.

And THAT is what the lamp stands for and it will be removed if we do not repent and return to what we were doing first when we first fell in love with Jesus.

You know it is so EASY for us to look back on these people and say OH POOR Church of Ephesus.

They lost their way.

I'm sure glad I'm not one of those NICOLAITANS

But hold on their Sparky, not so fast.

I have to say that personally this makes ME feel a bit uncomfortable.

As a Priest and as a Pastor of three churches.

Have we lost our first love?

How many of US drink from the cup at communion on Sundays only to drink from the cup that the world has to offer throughout the week with all its compromise and deceit?

And don't get me wrong, that cup tastes good.

But how many of us bring that cup from the world INTO church with our compromised ethic and secret habitual sin?

THIS was the sin of the NICOLAITANS.

I read somewhere ...

As unity around the gospel INCREASES the light given off by the church into a dark world grows brighter.

Which is a nice thought.

It is a comfortable thought.

But are we?

Are WE growing brighter?

Or have we lost our first love?

So ... with THAT said let's talk about this Gospel.

We are in the 12th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus is teaching in the temple.

It is a Wednesday.

Three days before he was to be crucified.

He has made a triumphant arrival and now the crowds are pressing in.

The High Priests, Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes all want him dead.

But he is just too popular. The crowds are so big they just can't get to him.

So, they have been trying for some time now to get the crowds to turn against him.

If they can just get him to do something heretical or unpopular.

Now these people, the High Priests, Pharisees and Sadducees don't really get along to well.

There is a tenuous balance of power as they each seek to curry favor under their Roman occupiers.

So, they hate each other but one thing they hate even more is Jesus because he is upsetting that balance of power.

He is a threat and He must be dealt with.

So, they had to try to figure out what to do with this Jesus problem.

Their FIRST attempt was with the Roman coin.

Remember?

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

That was a clever trap.

If he says NO, he is arrested for sedition.

If he says YES, then he AIN'T Messiah.

Jesus said show me the coin.

A coin, which by the way, was a PAGAN coin banned from even being on temple grounds.

It is produced, and Jesus says, “Render unto Caesar what is Caesars, and to God what is Gods” and He makes them look like fools.

STRIKE ONE,

Batter up.

Next up to bat come the Sadducees.

Now the Sadducees don't believe in a resurrection.

They rejected all that.

They held on to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus as sacred.

No mention of a resurrection.

They believed that when you die that was it.

Game called for rain.

Everybody out of the pool.

It's over.

And that is why they were Sad ... you see?

So, they come up with this **RIDICULOUS** scenario of a woman who marries seven brothers.

Jesus sees right through them and sends them off looking like the fools that they were.

STRIKE TWO

Batter up.

Here comes our Gospel.

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?”

So, who is this guy?

Well he is a Pharisee, but he is ALSO a Scribe which means he is a
SCHOLAR OF THE LAW.

And my thinking is they picked the top man.

Think of him as a modern-day Supreme Court justice.

In this same account in Matthew, he adds the detail, as Matthew is apt to do, when he said they said this to test him.

It is a trap.

Now it SEEMS like there is some sincerity with this scribe.

He seems to be objective.

But don't let appearances fool you

He had no doubt heard all about the coin and the whole render unto Caesar thing.

And how Jesus had sent them off looking foolish.

And speaking of foolish, the “7 husband question” of the Sadducees was not new.

They had been arguing this specific question with the Pharisees who DID believe in a resurrection for years.

But what about THIS question?

Which is the first among all the commandments?

What is he getting at?

What is he trying to accomplish?

What is his agenda?

Maybe he was hoping that Jesus would make up some new kind of commandment that superseded Mosaic Law.

Because of course, the crowds all held Moses in the highest of esteem.

He had seen God face to face and communicated with God one on one.

One Rabbi wrote that Moses was greater than the Angels.

And if Jesus taught ANYTHING that might somehow contradict or supersede Moses well then, they could deem him as a HERITIC and turn the people against him.

So, the scribe asks this TRAP question.

Now we need to consider that up till this point there simply was NO definitive answer to the trap question.

The Misha and the Talmud record many debates as to what greatest commandment was.

The Pharisee and the Sadducees would spend hours pondering such questions.

Jesus replied the first is this. Hear oh Israel. The Lord our God is Lord alone. And you should love the Lord your God with all your Heart, SOUL, MIND and STRENGTH.

This is nothing new.

This verse was known as the SHAMA and any practicing Jew would have it committed to memory as it was recited twice a day.

So, this is a good answer.

You can't argue with that one.

But He is not done yet.

He goes on ...

He pulls a line out of the 19th chapter of Leviticus as he says,

The second is this ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And I imagine the Pharisees cringed.

It was going so well.

I have said it many times, the cross has two beams.

The VERTICAL beam represents you and God.

The HORIZONTAL beam represents you and other people.

Understand this.

You and God is the easy part.

It's all these people who will drive you crazy.

But Jesus clearly says ...

There are no other greater commandments than these.

BOOM! In your face.

So, this scribe who has been sent as an emissary with a trap question designed to create chaos and death responds.

Well said Teacher, you are right to say that he is one and there is no other than and to love him with all our heart soul mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.

And then LISTEN TO THIS because it is beautiful.

He goes on to say it is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Now remember WHERE we are.

We are IN the Temple.

And we are in the middle of Passover.

It is ALL about burnt offerings and sacrifices.

It is ALL about the traditions of the elders.

It is ALL about this kabala of Religion that Jesus is railing against.

WHY?

Because they have lost their FIRST LOVE.

And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding he said to him,
“You are not far from the Kingdom.”

I imagine that old man smiled about now.

But he had failed in his mission.

And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

So, he says “You are not far from the kingdom.”

He’s close but not quite there.

He had the right understanding, but he was not there yet.

My friends what about us?

Have WE lost our FIRST LOVE?

Is our LAMP STAND fading?

If so WHAT can we do?

HOW do we LOVE God with all our Heart, SOUL, Mind, and STRENGTH?

Well Jesus gave us a clue.

We love God with all our Heart Soul Mind and Strength and we try learning how to LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES.

There is so much DIVISION and HATE in our world today and so often we drink from its cup.

We claim to love God with all our heart soul and strength but so many of us get pulled into the 24/7 cable news cycle of fear and hate.

We get lost in a mammon world driven by greed, lust, and materialism.

Jesus warns us clearly that it is IMPOSSIBLE to serve TWO Masters.

You will love one and despise the other.

One cannot serve both God and Mammon.

Not that there is anything wrong with working hard and making a living and providing for you family.

That is a Godly thing to do.

There is nothing wrong with that but there is something very wrong with the worshipping of money.

The COVETING.

The greatest hypocrisy of the Pharisees is that they held close to their TRADITIONS and they LOST their FIRST LOVE.

They practiced their traditions faithfully, but they LOVED their power and wealth.

Remember how we talked about the two worlds?

GOD's world and THE world.

They were living in both as many of us do.

They tried to drink from both cups.

And remember there is NOTHING wrong with traditions.

I practice tradition every time I say a mass.

Tradition is the LIVING FAITH of those who have crossed over ahead of us.

But TRADITIONALISM is the DEAD FAITH of those still living.

So again, what about us?

Are we just checking a box on Sunday and going through the motions?

Have we lost our FIRST LOVE?

And if we have, HOW can we find it again?

Well maybe we should take a cue from Jesus.

Turn off the ME Channel.

Get OUTSIDE of our own head and go find a lost sheep out there walking in circles.

They AIN'T hard to find and try to learn how to love them.

Just a little.

And if you find that difficult, fake till you make it.

My brother had a mentor one time.

He was all upset.

Someone had done him dirty.

He was mad, and he had good reason.

He asked him what he thought he could do about this situation and the old man said, "What do you think a really nice person would do in this situation?"

He went on to say, "Not that YOU are a real nice person, but IF you were what would a really nice person do in this situation?"

Why not just do THAT?

And who knows, if you do that long enough, YOU might even become nice person.

Have you lost your first love?

Has the divisiveness of this world pulled you away?

The anger,

The resentment and even hate.

Is it blocking you from the commandment Jesus is giving us today?

I invite you to search your heart this week.

I challenge you to love your neighbor as yourself.

Especially that it is hard to do

And YOU will not be far from the kingdom of God.

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