

Humility in Salutations

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10
Psalm 131
1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13
Matthew 23:1-12

There is a church in Fort Smith that regularly buys ads in the local newspaper detailing who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. Those who are going to heaven include those who belong to that particular church and those who are going to hell include anyone who does not go to that particular church. Their ad offers a detailed explanation; it lists each Christian denomination and explains why people belonging to that particular denomination are destined for hell. According to their ads, Catholics are all going to hell simply because they call their priests “father.” While the idea that God would cast someone into hell for calling someone “father” is ludicrous, it’s important for us to be aware of the popularity of such ignorance and to understand its origin—namely, a misunderstanding of our Gospel reading today.

In our Gospel, Jesus very clearly states that we are not to call any man, “father.” For fundamentalist Christians, this seems to be an open and shut case. However, if we read this Scripture passage in the context of the history of the Early Church, the New Testament, and the Gospel of Matthew it becomes very clear that it is not about the sinfulness of the title, “father.” Let’s look briefly at these three contexts.

We see from the earliest Christian writings that Jesus’ disciples did not interpret today’s Gospel reading to mean that it was sinful to call someone, “father.” Both Saint Stephen and Saint Paul addressed the Jewish crowds by calling them “brothers and fathers” (Acts 7:2; 22:1). And, as the Church grew throughout the first few centuries, the faithful commonly called the great teachers of the faith, “Father.” (ex. the “desert fathers”).

If we put today’s reading into the context of the New Testament, it becomes even clearer that using the salutation “father” is not a sin, because in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to Abraham (a mere human being) as our “father” (John 8:56). The Letter to the Hebrews clearly states that Jesus was without sin— “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrew 4:15). If Jesus was without sin, yet called a human being “father,” then this must not be a sin in and of itself.

Most importantly, we must put Jesus’ words in the context of chapter twenty-three of the Gospel of Matthew. This chapter is the culmination of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders of His time. Jesus was not opposed to salutations of “father” and “rabbi,” (Matthew 26:25, 49), but He was opposed to people using their faith and religion to seek honor, power, human approval and position. Instead, Jesus calls us to *humility*. The salutations that others use for us should be avenues of humility, not pride. They should turn our minds and heart toward *God*. The priesthood has helped me to learn this lesson.

When I first got ordained a priest, the salutation, “father” was almost mystical. I found it difficult to get used to people calling me “father.” In fact, I remember sitting in the conference room of the church office for a staff meeting just weeks after I got ordained and someone walked in and said, “Hello, Father,” and I quickly glanced around the room to see which priest had entered the room. It took me a while to figure out that they were talking to *me*!

Eventually, I settled into the idea of being called, “father,” but it became a source of pride—something that focused my attention on *me* rather than on *God*. Unconsciously, I let it be a false sense of identity. Then, through some strange circumstances, I ended up in the Leadership Fort Smith program. In this program, all titles were stripped away. I was involved in something where, not only was I not “*Father Tom*,” but it wasn’t explicitly spiritual or Catholic! This led to a lot of prayer! God gave me an opportunity to have my identity dismantled and rebuilt.

When God was finished, I had a whole new appreciation for the title, “father.” Rather than being a source of pride that made me focus on myself, it became a source of humility that continually turns my attention to God. It is a constant reminder that I am to reflect God. This is the point that Jesus is making in today’s Gospel—the salutations that we use in life are always meant to lead us into humility and to be mindful of how God is inviting us to be His reflection. If our title is “teacher,” then we are challenged to teach with the same tenderness and patience as God. If our title is “mother,” then we are challenged to be as nurturing and healing as God. If our title is “father,” then we are challenged to be as protecting and directing as God.

This week, let’s take some time to reflect on the various titles or salutations that are part of our lives and to be more deeply aware of how they humbly invite us into the very life of God.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ What is your favorite title for God (ex. Shepherd, Creator, Judge, Redeemer, etc.)? Share with God what this title means to you personally and how you have experienced God inviting you to reflect that meaning to others.