

FEBRUARY 12, 2023: 6TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME



A few years ago, I was on vacation in Prague with Mark, a priest friend of mine. We decided to take a tour of the city, and right after we sat down on the bus a family came aboard. It was a grandmother, her daughter and husband, and two grandchildren. I was seated in the very back of the bus behind Mark. The family was clearly hoping to sit together and the only place to do that was in the back seat where there were five seats. I offered to move so they could sit with each other and then I sat next to Mark. At this point all of us got to talking and remained together throughout the tour which lasted about two hours. At the end of the tour, the mother asked me what Mark and I did for work and my response was, "We are

Catholic priests." At that the grandmother turned to her daughter and said, "See, I told you." She then asked me if I would hear her confession. Her daughter said, "Mom, they are on vacation." I responded, "We are never on vacation from that." We then found an isolated spot that was quiet, and she went to confession.

I never asked what made her think we were priests, and now part of me will always wonder. But, to me, it brings up the question of how people perceive who we are. As I tell people, we are always in relationship with our perception of someone. What we all need to realize is that our perception of someone is not always reality. But it is "our reality" of the person. The truth is that as a priest, and particularly as a pastor, I am perceived in many different ways. I know that there are people who truly like me, and others who do not—at all. There are those who believe I am doing a good job, and there are those who think I am wrecking their parish. There are those who find me open and supportive, and those who find me unwelcoming and intimidating. There are those who find in me a way to move closer to Christ, and those who believe that I am roadblock. I obviously could go on and on. The truth and reality is that a person's perception of me is based on many factors: how they hear what I say; their experience of our time together; even, honestly, their own history; and, of course, what they are hoping to accomplish through our interaction. There are, of course, other factors, but you get the point: someone's perception of me is not something I can control. And it is not my job to try to influence another person's perception. Rather, as a Christian, what I am called to do is simply come to discern the person God created me to be, and to seek to grow in that understanding. My focus can never be on what another's perception is: it must only be on God's knowledge of who I truly am.

If we look to the Gospels, we can see clearly that people had many different perceptions of who Jesus was. He even asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And the answers He received went all over the place until He asked, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In response, Jesus was clear that this insight did not come from Peter alone, but that he able to see the truth of Jesus through the grace of God. Many people did not like Jesus. They did not like what He stood for. They did not like the challenges that He presented to them. They did not like how Jesus did not conform to the status quo: they sought to attack and belittle what He did. They cast aspersions upon how He could work miracles and what his motives were. But Jesus simply did not care about their perceptions of who He was or what He did. Jesus stayed focused on the only thing that mattered to Him, which was fulfilling the Father's will. He understood the person God was calling Him to be, and if people liked that and were drawn to Him—great! If they were not, He simply let them walk away.

Jesus had no illusions about where all this would lead Him. He made it clear that He would be crucified but that God would overcome and raise Him from the dead. He had confidence in God and trusted that the Father would always provide. It may not always have been what He wanted, but his response was always the same, "Not my will but yours."

We live in a world that cares usually more about perception than reality. As Christians we are called to look at life very differently. We must first realize that even our perception of ourself may be wrong. Each of us, through prayer, needs to seek God's understanding of us, which is never a perception—it is always reality. He has our instruction book and knows exactly who we are and who we can be. We have to be willing to let go of our own flawed sense of self in order to discover the person God created us to be. It is not about what we might want for ourselves; rather, it is about what God wants for us, which is always for our good.

Once we are truly open to discerning and growing into the person God has created us to be—and that is truly our focus—it will not matter what the perceptions of others may be. May we follow the example of Jesus and, like Him, truly grow in wisdom and understanding of ourselves by simply living out these words, “Not my will but yours.”

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@theholyrood.org , or if easier please call or text me at (978) 254-0560.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Fr. Brian".

Fr. Brian