

Homily for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
September, 9 2018
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The last month or so I've noticed a commercial on TV about a young woman climbing a mountain of cigarette butts and now having to be tested the rest of her life for lung cancer. Ironically, with each light of a cigarette, she missed the teeny tiny small print on the side of the package that was meant to warn of the possibility of such a dark future while at the same time cigarette manufacturers were looking at a bright future due to cigarette sales. What exactly is irony? The dictionary says irony is when a set of circumstances brings about exactly the opposite of what one would expect to occur. For instance: When I was a kid both my mother and father smoked. In fact, all of my aunts and uncles as best I can remember smoked. There seemed to be great satisfaction connected to the act and a cigarette followed every great moment in life. We saw commercials on TV like the Marlboro man. He was really cool! I couldn't wait to smoke and could not figure out why my parents would insist that we not take part in this obviously pleasurable experience. My cousins and I could not wait to sneak off behind the shed and take our first puff. It was then that the irony occurred. We all became green around the gills, got miserably sick and threw up. I never smoked again unfortunately some of my cousins did.

Throughout the years as I've watched cousins and close friends die of lung cancer I have wondered often at the irony of continuing a habit advertised to bring pleasure, but in all actuality, bringing about the opposite effect.

The Gospel and in fact all our readings today contain irony. Isaiah foresees that those whose hearts are frightened by God will be saved. The lame leap like stags; the tongues of the mute sing; streams pop up in the desert; burning sands become pools; thirsty ground becomes springs of water. These are all ironies describing the fulfillment of God's promise to bring salvation to a people unworthy of salvation. God's love brings forth unexpected opposites.

James tells us that God chose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. People who are of the world show partiality to those who possess gold rings and fine clothes but those who belong to Jesus who are in the world but not of the world show no partiality for worldly possessions. Luke, in Acts of the Apostles tells us, "We must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Jesus clearly tells us the Kingdom of God is ours if we follow his commands. Throughout scripture for every "blessing" of those who follow God's law there is clearly printed a "woe," a warning for those who do not. The irony here is that stripped of every worldly possession and standing

before God as naked as the day we were born is the moment when we will find out if we have become truly rich in God's Kingdom.

Mark then relates to us a tale steeped in irony. Jesus goes out of his way to enter the gentile region of the Decapolis. There people who are not of the chosen people, have heard of Jesus and hope that he can heal a man who is both deaf and mute. They bring the man to Jesus and beg him to heal their friend. Miraculously Jesus takes the man aside and privately opens the man's ears and gives him the gift of perfect speech. The people are totally amazed at what Jesus has done. Once, their faith, their belief, is given substance through Jesus' action of opening the man's ears they refuse to listen to Jesus when he asks that they keep it quiet. Once, their faith, their belief, is given substance through Jesus' action of opening the man's mouth they refuse to keep their own mouths shut when Jesus asks that they not speak of it. Then, we discover, that these gentiles cannot help but hear and speak what the chosen people have refused to hear and only grumble about. "He has done all things well; he makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Without knowledge of the prophets the gentiles recognize that Jesus has fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah while the chosen people, who have knowledge of the prophets, have failed to make the connection.

Perhaps we live out this same sort of irony in our lives. We too after all are a people unworthy of salvation yet Christ has already shown us the way to salvation. We are a people often given over to prejudice and we live in a society long noted for giving preference to earthly material rather than heavenly spiritual possessions. Are we also among those who profess belief in Jesus Christ but doubt that he can do anything for us? Would we be completely amazed if we asked Jesus for a miracle and it happened? And though we say we believe in Jesus when was the last time we used our lips and our actions to proclaim our belief in public? Sometimes I wonder if we, like smokers, are not bogged down by false advertisement and false images of the past unable to hear or speak the truth. The world tells us that living a moral life is bad for us; that speaking without using foul language is unusual and out of the ordinary; that going to church regularly is no longer in style; that God is an old concept we no longer need because we are smarter than that now. Perhaps some of us have bought into the lies of our society, have come to believe that living our Catholicism with its statements of faith and strict moral values will cause us to become green around the gills, get miserably sick and throw up. The truth about smoking is written in small print on the side of each package. The truth about our faith is written in scripture in the inspired Word of God both blessings for those who follow and warnings of woe for those

who do not. Together in the same size print! Ironically the words of both warnings are seemingly ignored by those who have the most to gain from heeding the warning.