

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

#MeToo last month opened a way on social media for people to stand against sexual harassment and assault. The meme gained momentum after several women accused a Hollywood mogul of unwanted sexual advances. The pool of accusations spread beyond one profession into a sea of allegations, especially of offenses committed by men against women in the workplace. The hash tag emboldened many women to share their experiences at a time when society was ready to listen; they assured other victims that they were not alone; they shone a light on misbehavior concealed in the dark. Women complained that a powerful male seized on their subordinate position and promised them advancement if they would participate in sexual activity. Not only were women subjected to fear, personal danger, and humiliation, they were told that inappropriate conduct had to be kept quiet or they would risk their career. Sometimes victims feel that they themselves are the guilty party, which is not the case. Some dread that if they make the encounters known, they will suffer more than the perpetrator. This cloak of silence permitted more harassment. Much of that got shattered last month as countless victims took to social media to say, "Me too."

Abraham Lincoln said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Many of us behave nobly when we struggle. But once we have authority, new temptations arise. We obtain much, but we want more, regardless of the methods we choose or the people we hurt.

Malachi is the last of twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. He wrote words that influenced both a line in Eucharistic Prayer III, "From the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name," and the phrase, "risen with healing in his wings," from the Christmas carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Today Malachi makes a rare appearance in the first reading of a Sunday liturgy. He challenges a certain group of people holding positions of authority: the priests. They are cheating on the sacrifices they offer; they are not living morally. Long before Jesus condemned religious authorities in today's gospel, here's what Malachi said to priests: "You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction.... I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people, since you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your decisions." In Malachi's prophecy, the Lord said, "my name will be feared among the nations." The priests feared God's punishment, so they listened to the command and changed their ways.

Today, many people do not fear God's punishment. Victims of sexual assault cannot rely on those fears. So they have used another method: publicity. Many who do not fear punishment by God do fear punishment in the media. Sometimes, exposure leads to contrition. Those who are caught seek forgiveness from the people they have offended and from sources of employment.

God can work through the media. God can use people's fears of bad publicity to create better behavior and a more respectful world. But someone has to play the role of Malachi. Someone has to call out those who misuse authority. Victims of sexual harassment may feel powerless, but they may actually exercise God's own power once they say, "Hey, me too."

Sunday, November 5, 2017