

Preached during JST's opening Orientation Mass, August 27, 2018

[Readings of the day](#)

I started thinking about this reflection weeks ago, examining the theme of community set forth in the first reading and the exhortation to not lose sight of the core of our faith found in the Gospel. I began reflecting on my experiences of community, both here at JST and with my feminist theologian friends spread throughout the country. I thought of what I might suggest to you all to help you avoid getting caught in the weeds, as so often unintentionally happens at grad school and also apparently was a problem for the scribes and Pharisees, at least according to Matthew. The themes fit new student orientation perfectly, my job would be easy.

I was going to tell a charming story about the MDiv 2 cohort based on the phrase “the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.” I had a lovely analogy to draw from the gifts of the altar and the altar and theology studies and the faith on which theology studies rely.

And then, a week and a half ago, a Pennsylvania grand jury report was released.

It was and is a stark reminder of the Church and world we all inhabit.

A place where power is abused.

Where the innocent are exploited.

Where the guilty are protected because of their wealth, status, or merely to save  
face.

Where sexual crimes are pushed aside.

Where mental and emotional distress is ignored.

Where wrongdoings are not apologized for but are concealed.

Where institutions that are meant to serve instead abuse.

A place where silence is the solution.

In this dark, seemingly hopeless place is where my deepest communities came to show themselves.

A place where my Jesuit brothers offered to listen to anyone who needed to talk. To just listen – to not respond, to not defend, but to profoundly and heartfully listen to those who have been hurt by the Church, to those who doubt the Church, to those who are struggling.

A place where supportive texts filled the group chat of a feminist theology institute I attended this summer. Texts that offered articles that would inform us but were less likely to trigger past experiences. Texts that expressed both hope and anxiety for the coming years. Texts of pain, texts of lament, and texts of support. Texts of love.

I thought about the people on that group text - at least two women who feel called to be priests, one woman who will soon be raising her child in the Church, one woman who would be named as a victim if this grand jury report were released in a different state. Women in precarious positions, positions where everything can and sadly will come crashing down, particularly when those in power become so caught up in the institutional Church that they forget its underlying faith and values. Members of my community, those I love, depend on the leaders of the Church not being like the Pharisees in today's gospel. These leaders must ignore the trappings of power – the gifts and the gold – and remember that they serve God and the people of God, not just themselves.

As students, we are here to study the Church and its theology. We are here to more deeply discover and embody a profound and vast tradition, but to also learn from its mistakes. We come to this new school, most likely nervous about classes, about meeting new people, about finding community. Today, we begin this journey tasked with another, even bigger challenge: to protect the innocent, to rebuild trust, to fight against unjust power, to acknowledge the wrongs of this institution that we know and deeply love. We are the future leaders of the Church, called now to help reform and rebuild a deeply ailing institution that often idolizes power instead of God. Our opening song concluded with the line “Let us... sing a new Church into being, one in faith and love and praise.” How are you, and we together as a whole, going to sing a new Church into being in our studies, our ministries, and our lives? And if not us, then who?