

Homily for Sunday, January 30, 2022 – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Once again, there is so much food for thought in each of the Scripture readings we have today. To add more words to all the words you just heard, here is a story I received while on a Men's Rite of Passage retreat, five years ago in California. It centers on the wisdom of a well-respected monk, Makarios the Great of Egypt.

A young man approached Makarios with the desire to become holy (and he only had a weekend to do it). Makarios told the young man that if he wants to become holy, he should go to the cemetery and rail against the dead with every insult he could throw at them. So off went the young man and he did just that. He went to the cemetery and told the dead how useless they were, how insignificant were their lives, and how easily they are forgotten by the living. When he was done insulting the dead, the young man returns to the monk. Makarios, the monk, asked him how he made out. The young man responded that his insults were met only with silence. The monk suggested the young man return to the cemetery but, this time, he was to heap praise and compliments upon the dead. The young man returns to the cemetery speaking to the dead in such terms: "You are the most wonderful people ever to have lived. You are missed by everyone who knew you. You were the most generous, forgiving, and wonderful people in all the world." When he was done, he reported back to Makarios that the results were the same---more silence from the dead. Makarios then told the young man that if he wanted to become a holy man, he must become like the dead taking no notice of peoples' insults nor of peoples' praises.

The readings, especially that first reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the gospel reading are very much about praises and insults. The Prophet Jeremiah lived 600 years before the birth of Jesus. He was forbidden by God to marry so that his whole life could be dedicated to preaching God's message. It must have been frustrating for him, for after preaching 40 years trying to turn peoples' hearts to God, his message was rejected. The people of Judah did not turn to God and, as a result, Judah fell to the Babylonians. Feeling like his life's work had been a colossal failure Jeremiah hears God say to him, "You are not *any* man, Jeremiah; you are *my* man. I chose you while you were still in the womb. Try as they may, your enemies will not prevail against you, for I am with you, to deliver you."

Jesus, like Jeremiah, was also called, and, like Jeremiah, Jesus is rejected by his very own as well. The words he shared in the synagogue with his fellow Jews were not well received, as we just heard. In fact, they try to kill him by throwing him off a cliff, but he passes through their midst. It's not a magic trick—now you see me, now you don't—it's a hint at the resurrection of Jesus. Death will not be able to bind Jesus for he is love clear through the middle. And as St. Paul told us in that second reading, "**Love never ends.**" Angry church-goers in Nazareth, power-hungry emperors in Rome, and sealed tombs will all come to an end, but God's love has no end.



In this gospel passage, as the saying goes, “Jesus went from hero to zero” in no time at all. The people all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Yet, in the very next sentence they are questioning his credentials and plotting his murder.

I remember having a conversation with a man who is always negative. Always. Instead of saying directly to him, “Why do you need to be so negative all the time?” I fabricated a story about working with someone who is always negative and how hard it was, on the head, to listen to such a negative person in the workplace all day long. Immediately, this man said, “Ya, I know what you mean, I can’t stand negative people; they really bring me down, too.” Then he went on with more and more negativity until I fabricated another story about why I needed to end the conversation. He didn’t get that I was talking about him.

Jesus uses the same technique. He tells stories, parables about issues, attitudes, and behaviors of the very people who are listening to him. Jesus doesn’t tell stories to entertain nor simply to point out human glory or folly. He tells stories in order to temporarily transport people into another world so that they can return to see and act in their own world in a new way. He hopes they’ll get it. Fickle people don’t get it; faithful people do get it. This is a fickle crowd in the synagogue.

They want a tame, domesticated Jesus. You can tell by their words, **“Is not this Joseph’s son?”** It’s not so much a question as it is pure sarcasm and very dismissive. In other words, “Who do you think you are, son of a carpenter? You think you’re better than us? You’re not the Roman emperor; you’re just a hick from the same hick town of Nazareth that we’re all from. But just in case you are the real deal, do for us—hometown boy—what we heard you did in Capernaum. Do some miracles here, like you did there, after all, you are one of us!”

When he doesn’t comply to their wishes, they turn on him and try to kill him. If nothing else, this is a horrible way to end a church service. He sees the deception in their hearts and how they want his message only on the condition that it brings them privileges. So, he tells them two quick stories about other people in the hopes they will see themselves in these stories and want to change for the better. It is the better in all of us that Jesus desires.

First story: the great, Jewish Prophet Elijah, during a drought (when heaven was shut up 3 ½ years), did not go to one of his fellow Jews to perform a miracle. Instead, he went to a widow at Zarephath. The dig in this story is that the people of Zarephath are all pagans. Yet, it’s to such a pagan woman that Elijah enacted a miracle and raised this woman’s son from the dead. The miracle happened because she was open to the true God, not the god of her making.

Second story: Elisha, Elijah’s successor, cleansed Naaman the Syrian of a terrible skin disease. Elisha didn’t do this for one of his fellow Jews; he did it for a Syrian commander, a soldier who was an arch-enemy of Israel. Why? Because Naaman open himself to the true God, not the god of his making.

Do you think those gathered in the synagogue got it, that Jesus was talking about them? No! Not a chance. They were not going to reflect on these stories, and they certainly did not want this upstart preacher challenging them to change for the better. After all, when you’re perfect, you’re perfect. Why

change? They could not celebrate the good Jesus was proposing, because it was not packaged in the way they wanted it. They will go to synagogue, like many who go to church, but there will be no inner transformation. They will saw the log in the same place they have always sawed it, and if anyone suggest otherwise, it will be over the cliff with that person.

The two greatest heresies (false teachings) within the Church according to Fr. Richard Rohr, are angelism and demonism. Angelism is when we put someone (maybe even ourselves or our denomination) on a pedestal and refuse to believe they can do any wrong. “Do here, hometown boy, the miracles you did down the road in Capernaum.” When an angel falls from the pedestal, and we realize they were human after all, it’s too much to handle. First, we are scandalized, then we turn on them, like as if they duped us.

The other heresy is demonism. This one works on the false pretext that nothing good could possibly come out of that person. They were born rotten, their parents were no good, and they are driven by selfish motives. “Is this not Joseph’s son?”

Neither angelism nor demonism leads us to the truth. Jesus is not trying to please those who think he’s an angel, an angel put on this earth to do miracles for those in Nazareth. Jesus is also not interested in pleasing those who think he’s the devil and so should be thrown over a cliff. He's not playing either of their games. In fact, he’s not playing any game at all. He is only trying to do one thing—to be faithful to God, the Ultimate Truth. He is the Teacher, and if we allow him, he will teach us as he tried to teach them. He will introduce us to Good News that is bigger and better than any of us could have ever imagined. He is the Master because he first learned to be the disciple who takes no notice of peoples’ insults nor of peoples’ praises.

Fr. Phil