

Homily for Sunday, June 25, 2023

It's a pretty safe statement for me to say that every one of us has experienced doubts, discouragement, and fears. I hope every one of you has also had moments of hope and people on your life journey who have spoken words of encouragement to you. The Scripture readings we are given today are so realistic, echoing both discouragement and encouragement. If you spent just a little bit of time with the Prophet Jeremiah, our first reading, or with the gospel reading from Matthew, you will find much of your story named on those pages. Let's start with the realistic portrayal of Jeremiah. Today, we only get a slice of all Jeremiah's highs and lows, but it's a good slice.



Jeremiah was a shy and timid man who was called by God to be a public figure. Right away the most common fear of all human beings who have ever lived is named---public speaking. The second most common fear, universally, is death, but it is a distant second to public speaking. To put it crassly, given the choice, most people would prefer to be the dead person in the casket rather than the person who has to speak publicly about the deceased person.

Jeremiah was not asked by God to be an observer, a reporter. He was asked to denounce the moral evil and corruption of his time. This must have been sheer torture for this shy and timid man. He spent 40 years warning the people of Judah to turn from their secular ways and to put God back at the center of their lives. He was ignored for all of those 40 years and, as a result, Judah fell to the Babylonians. Have you ever been passionate about something that no one else cares about at all? Fr. Ron Rolheiser calls this moral loneliness, the worst kind of loneliness. That was Jeremiah's world.

Jeremiah, like all true prophets, never chose the public life of a prophet. In fact, he thought of every excuse not to be God's prophet like the fact that he thought he was too young. God's comeback was that He called Jeremiah while Jeremiah was still in his mother's womb! Hard to argue against that. Nevertheless, Jeremiah gave up the opportunity to marry and have a family so that he could devote his entire life to preaching God's word. And what was the result? The result was 40 years of people ignoring him, denouncing him, and even his closest friends wishing him to stumble and fail in life. But later on he will say, "It was all worth it. While I didn't want to be your prophet, you seduced me, you overpowered me, you were stronger, and so I allowed myself to be seduced. Even though terror was all around me and voices were yelling 'Denounce him!' I couldn't refrain from speak your word. It was like a fire in my heart." That's the best description of a "calling," religious or otherwise, I have ever come across. It's the thing you cannot not do. You feel compelled to do it even if it seems to go against common sense, logic, or even what you feel are your gifts and talents.

While feeling the pain of moral loneliness—the worst kind of loneliness—Jeremiah also has a deep sense that God was in his corner giving him everything he needed to meet the challenges before him. Can you believe, on your worst day when you feel you in a game you cannot win, that God is also upholding you and using you for some greater purpose? Can you believe that your struggle with

alcoholism is a game you don't experience without the help of God, and that with the help of God, you can actually be God's prophet, God's messenger of hope for other with the same struggle?

What paralyzes or prevents us from thinking that way? Fear. Fear is the great enemy of faith. In today's gospel passage, Jesus says three times, "Do not be afraid." Does he think we're deaf? Or, does he know something we don't know—that fear plays a bigger role of all of our lives than we want to admit?

Jesus has a way of ratcheting up fear in our lives and then undercutting and destroying our fear in just a few words, in just a simple truth. Here comes the ratcheting up. "Do not fear the one who can kill the body. You want something to fear? Fear the one who can kill both the soul and body in hell." Well thank you, Jesus. Just when I was having a bad day thinking my body was in peril, you tell me I should fear my soul going into hell as well! This does not help. Jesus sounds a lot like my mother when we were young, and she would say, "Stop your crying, or I'll give you something to really cry about!"

First comes the fear, then comes the great comfort that alleviates all fear. "You see those two sparrows over there? Their combined value is a penny. If God provides for those things that are basically worthless, how much more is God providing for you, you who are worth many sparrows?" It's an argument from the lesser to the greater. "And did you count the number of hairs on your head before you went to bed last night and how many were on your head when you got up this morning? Oh, you didn't? What a shame, because there is a reality that is so concerned about you, so madly in love with you, that this reality notices and loves everything about you." If that is true, you have nothing to fear.

This talk of Jesus comes from a section of the gospel scholars call the "missionary sermon." In Matthew's gospel, Jesus starts his public ministry with the Sermon on the Mount, and he sends his Apostles into their public ministry with the Missionary Sermon; he is missioning them. Both sermons begin with Jesus ratcheting up fear and immediately dispelling their fear. This past winter we heard the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus told us that we were blessed, we were salt of the earth, and that we were the light of the world. Then he turned up the fear. He knows how to press our buttons. We're so predictable when it comes to fear. He said, as if to instill fear in us, "What if the light, that you are, is hidden under a bushel basket? What good is it? And, what if the salt, that you are, loses its taste and is good for nothing except to be thrown under food? Oh, no! What then? Fear, fear, and more fear. But here comes the greater truth. There is a way that the blessedness within you can never be eradicated, even if you are poor in spirit, are meek, and are mourning. There is a way that the light can never stop shining even if it is not seen by others simply because it's under a bushel basket. It's still shining; you just need to put it where it belongs---on a lampstand. And finally, there is a way, on a chemical level, that salt can never lose its saltiness, never!

When the lesser truths of life, like disappointment, moral loneliness, pain, suffering, depression, and even death creep into our lives we may very much feel like Jeremiah—abandoned. In those moments a greater truth will be pushing through reminding us that God care and love for us extends down to the last hair on our heads. In that moment discouragement will give way to encouragement and we will proclaim this truth from the housetops.