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September 3, 2017

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One of the first books about Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement was titled *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*. The title referred to a scene from *The Brothers Karamazov* in which a pious woman tells a holy man that she dreams of serving the poor as a Sister of Mercy. The wistful thought brings tears to her eyes, but the romance fades when she considers that the real poor may be ungrateful for her sacrifices. The holy man replies, "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." That sums up the message of today's liturgy.

Today we see Jeremiah at his best and bordering on blasphemous. He accuses God of seducing him into a life that has brought him nothing but hardship and rejection. He never wanted to be a prophet, but he was enticed by God who spoke tenderly, saying, "I formed you in the womb" (Jeremiah 1:5). God promised: "I am with you to deliver you ... I will put my words into your mouth" (1:8-9).

Jeremiah fell for it. He allowed God to work through him, and the people rejected him for proclaiming God's word. Jeremiah was miserable because he shared God's fate.

Jesus, of all people, could understand Jeremiah's plight. As God's beloved, he not only spoke God's word, he lived and breathed the Father's care. He gave of himself as bread to the hungry and moved through life as God's hand outstretched to the

rejected and needy. History and his own experience of being criticized, rejected and threatened assured him that the powerful would seek the way to do him in.

We can assume that when Jesus talked about his impending suffering and death it was not to impress his disciples with his future-telling skills. He was sharing his heart. He wanted them to know and understand what he had discerned about God's will for him.

When he said he must go to Jerusalem, he was saying that was the only way to be true to his vocation. The disciples were savvy enough that they weren't surprised that going to Jerusalem would bring Jesus suffering. What they didn't understand, however, was why he would do it in the first place. That was what Jesus had to teach them, and he tried again and again. His primary way of teaching was through action — only after acting did he explain what he was doing.

Jesus had to go to Jerusalem because to avoid confronting the powers aligned against him would have been to admit the impotence of his own message. So, in essence, he said, "They are going to unleash everything in their arsenal against me, and it is going to take my life. But, God will not let that be the end of the story." He put all his cards on the table: "If you believe in me, if you want to follow me, this is where the road is leading." Jesus' faith, at that moment, was greater than anything the disciples could imagine.

Jesus wasn't courting death. He wasn't even baiting his opponents. He was simply teaching his disciples that his integrity demanded that he not hide from danger. He had to decide between being true to his message and saving his skin. He decided to leave the latter to God, trusting that his Father would also give him the grace and strength to accomplish the former.

Unlike some of our brothers and sisters in places in Africa and the Middle East, few of us in the United States will ever have to face anything like the persecution Jesus and his disciples confronted. To those of us who don't have to walk the road toward martyrdom, Paul offers a different and no less costly challenge. He says, "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." He's not saying "run to the coliseum to volunteer for a lion fight." That is too easy as a once-and-for-all solution, a romantic hero's role that we choose for ourselves. Paul calls us, instead, into a daily struggle for faithfulness: "Do not conform yourselves to this age."

This is the call to live with Christ-like integrity, to stand up for the values of the reign of God, no matter the cost. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize laureate who survived the Holocaust, is quoted as saying: “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor ... Silence encourages the tormenter, never the tormented.” Our road to Jerusalem offers us glimpses of religious persecution, of refugees turned away from shelter, and billboards advertising a philosophy that proclaims that we will make a better world by putting ourselves first. Disciples of Jesus must not remain silent. Such realities demand of us a Gospel response.

Gospel love is indeed hard and dreadful. It can cost us everything. But, is there anything worth living for without it?

JEREMIAH 20:7-9

One of the many things the Scriptures, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, have to teach us is brutal honesty in prayer. It’s an honesty that not only expresses our deepest sentiments, but one which leads us to understand how our relationship with God has touched and formed us.

Today, we hear the prophet Jeremiah shouting one of the fiercest of his many complaints to God. (The French word *jeremiad*, meaning a prolonged lamentation, comes from his name.) “You duped me!” he cries, “And I let myself be duped.” That’s pretty strong language to use with the Almighty. Two ways of interpreting it are “You fooled me” or “You seduced me.”

Some of the next lines explain what he meant if the correct interpretation is “you fooled me.” When Jeremiah heard God’s call, he also heard God promise, “Do not be afraid ... for I am with you to deliver you” (Jeremiah 1:8). Jeremiah believed that God would remain with him through thick and thin. But, instead of feeling the consolation of God’s love, he suffered the same desolation as God at the people’s sin. Like God, he mourned the results of their foolishness (Hosea 11:1-4). Jeremiah described his soul-rending grief saying, “Oh, that my head were a spring of water, my eyes a fountain of tears, that that I might weep day and night over the slain from the daughter of my people!” (Jeremiah 8:23). At another moment, he lamented, “Woe to me, my mother that you gave me birth!” “Everyone curses me,” and “Tell me, Lord, have I not served you for their good?” (15:10-11). Jeremiah’s worst problem was simply that God was true to the promise. Not only was God with him, but he was with God, suffering the same rejection that the people meted out to their Creator.

Jeremiah's complaint is not just that of a disgruntled worker, someone who could go on strike or quit. The second interpretation of "you duped me" is "you enticed me, you seduced me." That touches into the heart of Jeremiah's problem. He had allowed himself to become involved in a passionate love affair with God. God's word had drawn him in: "When I found your words, I devoured them; your words were my joy, the happiness of my heart." But, such a love brought him to feel God's own pain: "You filled me with rage" (15:16-17).

Jeremiah admits he was not just duped, but God's word lives in him. Try as he would, he couldn't ignore the fire of God's message within him. He became God's prophet, he consumed God's word and God's word now consumes him. Like Paul who told the Corinthians he was compelled to spread the Gospel, "Woe to me if I do not preach it!" (Corinthians 9:16), God's word and presence inhabited him, and there was no turning back.

Jeremiah says, "You duped me and I let myself be duped." While there is seemingly no happiness in his words, he is expressing profound love. In effect, Jeremiah is saying, "You called me, and I fell in love with you. Now, your cause is mine, no matter what it costs. There may be terrible moments in living this vocation, but it is ultimately better, more life-giving and fulfilling than anything else that could have ever happened."

ROMANS 12:1-2

Paul exhorts his readers "by the mercies of God." He's not speaking as a teacher or pastor making an ethical demand, but asking the people to consider what God has done for them and to respond appropriately.

What is appropriate? Paul says, "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." He was not speaking of martyrdom; he called for a "living sacrifice." That consisted in the double-pronged activity of standing up to the values of the age and allowing themselves to be transformed.

Paul's message fits perfectly between those of today's other two readings. With Jesus who was leading his disciples to Jerusalem, Paul calls the Romans to stand firm in rejecting conformity to the false values of the age. That implied that they were to cultivate their faithfulness to Christ, no matter the social cost.

Paul also called them to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” so that they could discern God’s will. That was an exhortation to be like Jeremiah, allowing God to become the fire inside them, even to the point that they would not balk at any sacrifice.

MATTHEW 16:21-27

Though we don’t hear the first four words as a part of the Gospel passage this Sunday, Matthew 16:21 begins “*From that time on*, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem” (emphasis added). Those first four words were important to Matthew because they signaled a turning point in his Gospel. Things were getting more intense, and Jesus was going to concentrate his teaching ministry on those closest to him, trying to lead them to understand him more profoundly, and thus, strengthen their faith in God. Today’s Gospel presents the first of Jesus’ three specific predictions about the suffering and death he was to undergo. While those three differ in the details, they all end with the promise that he will be raised “on the third day.”

Between the time in the desert when the tempter offered Jesus three ways to betray his vocation and this announcement of the passion, we have a few hints about how Jesus grew in understanding what his faithfulness would cost him. Earlier, he had warned his disciples that they would be persecuted (Matthew 10). He encouraged them to become as simple as doves and shrewd as serpents. Most of all, he taught them that the powers of evil might be able to kill the body, but that they have no power over the soul. In the language of the day that meant that the powers of this world can injure and even destroy the body (*soma*), the physical, ever-changing, perishable dimension of the human person. But the *psyche* or “soul,” the real self where conscience, decision and relationships reside, is beyond the power of evil.

Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, to the confrontation between the kingdom of his Father and kingdoms of this world. To avoid that confrontation would have amounted to a passive approval of the rule of the religious and civil authorities who were so threatened by him that they were determined to eliminate him. Refusal to face them down would have affirmed the superiority of their power. Jesus had to face them to be true to himself. He had to risk his body to save his soul.

Peter’s response to Jesus’ plan seemed to make very good sense: “God forbid!” Peter was operating on the level of safety rather than salvation. Unwittingly, he

echoed the desert tempter whose every suggestion attempted to sway Jesus from being true to his vocation. Jesus replied with the harsh retort: “Get behind me!” Peter the “rock” was putting himself in Jesus’ path as a stumbling block, and Jesus will not fall for it.

There’s no collegiality here, no room for debate. Jesus has discerned the necessary path, and his disciples can only choose whether or not to follow him as he carries it through. Will they get behind him? Are they committed to follow him? If so, they will have to do it in his style, leaving behind their visions of a mythic messiah who would overpower the world on its own terms. If they were planning on a victory that reflected the values of their society, Jesus was offering something entirely different, something far more costly and far more rewarding.

The incident we witness here between Jesus and his disciples gives plot, characters and script to what John’s Gospel says so succinctly with the proclamation: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The first issue in Matthew’s scene is truth, most specifically, Jesus being true to himself, to his Father and his vocation. Jesus presents and represents truth and all its depth in stark contrast to the mendacity and superficiality of his adversaries. Jesus invites his disciples to follow him in the way of truth which means to be willing to risk their own lives rather than lose their reason for living.

This is a turning point in Matthew’s Gospel. Immediately after Peter spoke for the disciples and acknowledged Jesus as Messiah, Jesus began to intensify his teaching about what was implied in following him. As always, his primary way of teaching was through his behavior. His words simply explained what he was doing.

We come to the liturgy to hear this Gospel, not as a scene from the past, but as a challenge to decide whether or not we are willing to follow Christ on the way to Jerusalem today and be ready for all that will demand of us.

Planning: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

One might assume that being called by God for a special mission would be a welcome honor. Speaking for God, however, has never proven to be a very popular or enjoyable enterprise.

Prophets often speak of the burden they feel and the abuse they receive, as Jeremiah does in our first reading today. “The word of the Lord has brought me derision and reproach all the day.” Yet, the prophet feels compelled. The word of God is a powerful force, and he cannot relinquish his vocation to speak it.

The reason for this ill treatment of prophets is indicated in today’s Gospel. Jesus reproaches Peter when he objects to the passion that Jesus has just foretold. “You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” It is that gap between God’s ways and human ways, God’s thoughts and human thoughts that brings about rejection of the prophet and his or her message.

Of course, this is not only an ancient problem. It persists in every age, including our own. Preachers are perhaps the first who come to mind. They are called to preach God’s word in its fullness and to apply it to contemporary situations. Most, if not all, of those situations are contested politically and socially, and every congregation has members who will be offended by mention of any given topic.

Pastors, especially, find themselves in a bind. If they offend people by tackling difficult issues, the collections may go down and the parish budget may be in trouble. But, if they try to keep everyone happy, they are reduced to preaching pabulum that eviscerates the message of the Bible.

But, it is not only ordained preachers who are called to speak God’s truth. In the Gospel today, Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. And, in the second reading, St. Paul urges us to offer our “bodies as a living sacrifice.” He goes on to remind us: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

We are all called to promote the will of God, which is often in conflict with the ways of our society.

Preachers and planners might challenge themselves this week to discern where their own values and assumptions might be in conflict with God’s ways. We cannot effectively preach what we do not embrace in our own lives. When we are in tune with God, then our words and our actions will prophesy!

Labor Day: Prayers for laborers and for just wages are certainly appropriate today, raising up one example of how our society rejects God’s ways.

Prayers: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today’s readings are for those who may have assumed that responding to God’s call would be easy. The prophets, Jesus, the early Christians — none were spared from negative consequences or pain in responding to the call. Is this a warning of what is to come if we follow Christ, or merely a tip-off that commitment always contains the unknown? However we view it, we can take comfort in knowing that we are in very

good company. And we know that God is with us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you have called many to follow you: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you warned that the last will be first, and the first will be last: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you taught us that God is always generous: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for our own needs and the needs of the world.

Minister For the church and for all who suffer for their commitment to Christ ... we pray,

- For those persecuted because of their religious beliefs ... we pray,
- For those who make sacrifices on behalf of the poor or unemployed, the undereducated or uninsured ... we pray,
- For teachers and students beginning a new school year, especially in substandard schools ... we pray,
- For those unwilling or afraid to deny themselves for the sake of others ... we pray,
- For all workers across the world, especially the underpaid and those who work in inhuman conditions ... we pray,
- For those who work at maintaining a home; and for parents who cannot find adequate child care ... we pray,
- For all who are in need in this community, especially the sick and the dying ... we pray,

Presider God who calls us, we know that living in Christ will never be simple or easy. Give us hearts that are open to whatever consequences we may be asked to endure. We know that you will be with us, as you were with him. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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