Opinion
Spirituality
Scripture for Life



Mothers in Portland, Oregon, demonstrate against racial inequality outside the federal Justice Center July 18. (CNS/Reuters/Caitlin Ochs)



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Global communities have "woke," with voices from the margins shouting, reaching an ear-piercing pitch in the breathtaking struggle against injustice during a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Aug. 30, 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-9

Psalm 63

Romans 12:1-2;

Matthew 16:21-27

Everywhere people take to the streets, marching in solidarity against racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, gender and orientation discrimination, police brutality and militaristic law enforcement. The margins have had enough! They rise up, once again, and push against the seemingly impenetrable boundaries of hegemonic power that privileges the few and disenfranchises the many.

The margins make their presence known and felt. They expose the myriad of injustices that have plagued, riddled and marred the human community for eons, leaving the web of life tattered, torn and tottering on the threshold of extinction. The margins speak truth to power. They press in on comfort zones. They will not accept being silenced, bullied, pushed aside, discounted any longer. The margins resist.

This Sunday's readings invite everyone to and into the margins, if some of us are not already there. To be prophetic like the character Jeremiah in the first reading is to embody the margins. To be Christian in the context of the Gospel is to embrace life on the margins. To live on the margins is to be uncomfortable, forever yearning, pining and thirsting for the One whose Spirit provides strength, purpose and sustenance when the work of justice leaves our bones wearied and our hearts

broken.

Paul's letter to the Romans offers a timeless challenge: to allow ourselves to be transformed as we work for the transformation of structures, mindsets, attitudes and policies that have caused and continue to cause systemic oppression time immemorial. Conformity to and comfortability with discrimination and oppression in any way, shape or form on this planet is not acceptable. The letter calls for a renewal of mind. Hence, all of the readings for this Sunday are a "call to action" that can no longer go unheard or unheeded.

The reading from Jeremiah provides a window into prophetic engagement. Vulnerability is part of the experience. The prophet accomplishes what needs to be done through the power of the divine Spirit to which the prophet has to be completely open. This Spirit overtakes the prophet's life. The character Jeremiah thought he was going to become a "fortified city," an "iron pillar" and a "bronze wall" against the whole land. He did not realize that he was going to have to give himself over completely to the divine and become vulnerable to the transformative Spirit that would give him the knowledge and strength he would need to confront the injustices of his day.

And confront he does. To the mainstream "malestream," to his own people, he becomes an object of ridicule. His message of violence and outrage pertains to the impending Babylonian invasion of Judah, the aggression of this invading empire and the unjust actions and attitudes of his own community. His message and work put him on the margins of his own people. As much as he wants to ignore his "call" and its tasks, he cannot. Justice enflames his heart, ruminates in the marrow of his bones, giving him no inner peace. Now on the margins, he must carry on in the face of adversity, in the midst of hostility.

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The responsorial psalm describes someone hungering and thirsting for the divine whose kindness, sustenance and care are better than life itself. The psalm begs these questions: What kind of a sacred presence do we long for? The One who keeps us comfortable? Or is it the One among us who is marginalized, whose spirit and face evade our cognition and therefore our recognition?

The letter to the Romans calls people to be transformed by the renewal of their minds. The experience of climate crisis, COVID-19, the rising up of the margins and death within all human and non-human communities on the margins should shake us to realize that we can no longer think the way we do, especially if we think the way dominant cultures do. Renewing our minds in a global context for the 21st century is no longer an option.

The Gospel reading invites us to become uncomfortable, to embody the Christ who, like Jeremiah, is on the margins. The Jesus of the Gospels challenges, though not fully, the political, social, cultural and religious structures and attitudes of the day. Horrifically, this work for justice ends in the Christ's death by crucifixion, and today, acts of injustice "crucify" people on the margins every day. The temptation for those who are privileged in any way is to stay comfortable, but the call to the privileged is to act prophetically, to be displaced to the margins, if we are not already there.

So what burns in your heart and what runs through the marrow of your bones?

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