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by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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In the early days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a unique video went viral. A Ukrainian woman confronted some Russian soldiers, called them invaders and fascists (among other things), and became famous for giving one of them sunflower seeds. She said he should keep the seeds in his pocket so that they would grow once he was buried under Ukrainian soil.

Had the prophet Jeremiah been there, he might have led the cheers for her clever way of confronting an enemy far more physically powerful than she.

Today, we meet Jeremiah in one of his most wretched moments. The lament we hear now began with this tirade: "You seduced me, Lord, and I let myself be seduced! ... I say I will not mention [you] ... but then it is as if fire is burning in my heart."

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 25, 2023

Jeremiah 20:10-13
Psalm 69
Romans 5:12-15
Matthew 10:26-33

From there, Jeremiah continues with the dirge we hear in today's Liturgy of the Word.

In his turmoil, Jeremiah wavers between fear and faith. Although he comes down on the side of faith that God will be with him, his concept of how God operates sounds more like the Ukrainian woman than like Jesus. Jeremiah trusts not only that his sufferings are a test from God, but also that God will take vengeance on his detractors — ideally, in a way that Jeremiah can watch and savor.

The hope that God will protect the righteous and smite the wicked runs through much of the Hebrew Scriptures — and, if we would admit it, remains strong among many who think of ourselves as Christian today. In its extreme, it's the way of thinking that defends prejudices, war and capital punishment, insisting that it is godly to punish evildoers. (For an extreme example, see Psalm 68:22-24.)

In many instances, such thinking is tragically understandable. It's hard to imagine *not* wanting cruel bullies to suffer for crushing others. Undeserved tragedy and persistent persecution nearly always motivate vengeance.

From this perspective, it sounds almost like a blessing to simply say, "May flowers grow up from your remains." The Ukrainian woman offered the soldiers something a tiny bit better than their just deserts.

What kind of an antidote does the Gospel provide to this very human way of thinking?

As Jesus sent the disciples out to preach, he said, "Fear no one." After promising that truth will win out, Jesus summarized his instructions by saying, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the one who can destroy both body and soul."

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The easiest explanation of this idea suggests that we not fear human beings, but rather God whose destructive power is so much greater. Really? Does it seem in character for Jesus to say, "Be careful who you offend! Daggers and crosses can't do you anywhere near as much harm as God can"?

Is the father of Jesus a god who would destroy body and soul? If not, then what is Jesus saying?

Jesus, who at the moment of his own arrest told one of his disciples, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," never promoted vengeance of any kind. Perhaps Jesus was trying to warn his disciples that physical harm is nothing compared to the power revenge has to eat away one's spiritual, psychological and even physical well-being. In line with his command to love their enemies, Jesus cautions them that hatred and vengeance do more harm to the perpetrator than to the victim.

Jesus' answer to persecution offers no tit-for-tat. Rather, Jesus begins from God's love.

To Jeremiah he might say, "Don't let them inhabit your head! They can chase you, denounce you, even kill you, but you can remain free of mind and heart if you

remember the love of the God who called you and who undergoes all of this with you."

To the Ukrainian woman he might say, "Be careful that your warnings invite the enemy to change for the better. To offer them nothing but suffering only increases the suffering in the world."

And to us? Jesus would probably remind us that our greatest powers do not come from our physical or intellectual prowess but from the attitudes that motivate our actions.

One person's strength can intimidate others. Another's sharp tongue and wit can cut an adversary off at the knees. But such exercises of dominance do nothing more than tip an ugly balance like a teeter-totter; they do not change the world.

Real love of the enemy disarms and nourishes everyone involved. As Paul taught the Romans, what changes world history is the gracious gift of Jesus Christ overflowing for the many. May it flower among us!

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