

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time - January 30, 2022

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Whenever I hear the name of the prophet Jeremiah, from whose book our first reading is drawn, I cannot help but think of a song from 1970 by Three Dog Night, entitled “Joy To The World.” The opening line is “Jeremiah, was a bullfrog; was a good friend of mine.” Now that I’ve probably forever colored your perceptions of this Old Testament prophet, let me continue.

While last Sunday’s readings celebrated the work of the ministers of God’s Word, today’s readings make clear the cost of this ministry to those who respond to God’s call and Jeremiah, the prophet—not the bullfrog—among all the prophets in the Old Testament, is a most striking example of the cost of proclaiming God’s Word.

In today’s first reading, Jeremiah is called to be God’s mouthpiece, not just to the people of Israel, but “to [all] the nations.” God first speaks to Jeremiah in very intimate terms about how he was called and chosen even before he was born. But then God tells Jeremiah to get ready to do battle—“to gird [his] loins”—since “Judah’s kings and princes,” in fact “the whole land [of Israel],” will fight him; they will **reject** God’s Word as spoken through Jeremiah. In spite of this dire prediction, God assures Jeremiah that He will protect him; God promises to be with him. Not only was Jeremiah rejected by the political and religious leaders of Israel, who didn’t want to hear of the disaster that was about to befall them due to their unfaithfulness to God’s covenant; they also tried to kill him; the ultimate rejection!

Today’s Gospel reading begins where last Sunday’s Gospel ended, with Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth telling those present, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” With these words, Jesus was proclaiming himself to be the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy about the poor knowing the “good news,” captives rescued, the blind able to see and the oppressed allowed to go free. In effect, Jesus was saying that “the reign of God is here, because I’m here.”

Initially, all “spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from [Jesus’] mouth.” It took a few moments for his words to sink-in. Next, their amazement turned to bewilderment: “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” The people in the synagogue were thunderstruck; they wondered how could someone from their own town, whom they knew, say these things?

Then, Jesus, anticipating their desire for miracles and predicting their inevitable reaction due to their lack of faith in him, says **for** them, “Do here in your native place the things that we’ve heard were done in Capernum...Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.” Jesus was quoting from a popular saying as well as drawing on what those in Nazareth would have known of the fate of the Jewish prophets.

If those words weren’t enough to turn the people’s bewilderment to anger, Jesus reminded them of the stories of the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who helped, not fellow Jews, but a Gentile widow and Naaman, another Gentile. With these words, Jesus is comparing himself to the great prophets AND reminding those in the synagogue that these two prophets took their message, God’s message, to outsiders. He’s telling them that they cannot expect any miracles, like those Jesus performed at Capernum, because they lacked faith.

Needless to say, the crowd **rejected** Jesus and his message, to the point that they tried, unsuccessfully, to kill him, similar to what was attempted with Jeremiah.

Just like Jeremiah and Jesus, we're all faced with rejection at various points in our lives: Whether it be rejection when applying for college or a job, or being rejected by someone we love. But how do we respond to rejection?

St. Paul, in today's reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, which also begins where last Sunday's reading ended, reminds us that our response to God's calling must be our practice of the cardinal virtues of faith, hope and love. Faith in God sustains us in spite of the obstacles we encounter, including rejection. Hope motivates us to remain focused and to believe that our efforts, our lives, will not be in vain and that we'll ultimately triumph over those life obstacles. But St. Paul identifies love as foundational; without love, a love that is completely generous and giving of self without expectation of return, we "gain nothing."

Throughout the gospels, Jesus responds to obstacles, to rejection, with love; that is our challenge.

Sadly, rejection is part of the human condition. We need only consider 20th century members of the communion of saints for additional examples of those rejected. Dorothy Day, a pacifist in the Catholic Worker Movement, and St. Archbishop Oscar Romero, are but two:

- Dorothy Day was long an embarrassment to the Catholic hierarchy; however, the cause for her canonization is now open and Pope Francis praised her as a notable American when he spoke before a joint session of Congress in 2015. When reflecting on the meaning of the Catholic Worker, she echoed St. Paul when she said that neither poverty nor community were its most important characteristics but, rather, "the final word is love."
- St. Archbishop Oscar Romero was hated, rejected, and eventually assassinated, not only because of his advocacy, his love, for the poor but because he was viewed as turning away from the upper classes, who felt the Church was "their own."

Dorothy Day and St. Archbishop Oscar Romero, despite experiencing widespread rejection, were embodiments of St. Paul's call to love. Do we have what it takes to overcome life's obstacles, life's rejections, and love the way that St. Paul challenged the Corinthians?