

JUNE 25TH, 2017: TWELFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Today's first reading is from what I regard as the Bible's most depressing chapter: Jeremiah 20.

As we hear in chapters 10-20, the prophet actually dares confront Yahweh about his problems. Though Jeremiah's convinced he's one of Yahweh's spokespersons, his enemies not only treat him like dirt – some have even put out contracts on his life – but Yahweh lets them get by with it.

To correctly understand the depth of Jeremiah's complaints it's important to note that during the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, the prophet can't fall back on the two safety nets we frequently employ today in parallel situations. First, he has no belief in a heaven or hell. He can't say, "They'll get 'theirs' after they die; while I'll get 'mine.'" People's actions were rewarded or punished in this life only. The afterlife offered neither reward nor punishment. Second, there's no concept of a devil as we know it. In many situations, Yahweh causes good *and* evil. In Exodus 7:3, for instance, God actually tells Moses he'll "harden Pharaoh's heart" so he won't let the Chosen People leave Egypt? How do you deal with a God who actively works against what he/she tells you to do and admits it?

In today's passage Jeremiah can only fall back on his conviction that Yahweh will come to his aid, though at this point there's no sign he/she will do so in time for the prophet to actually "witness the vengeance you take on them." It doesn't do the prophet any good if Yahweh avenges him five minutes after he dies. In some sense, his praising Yahweh for "rescuing the life of the poor from the power of the wicked" is a little like whistling in the dark. Further along in this chapter, when his pain becomes unbearable, he'll demand to know why he was even born!

Because of the two safety nets I mentioned above, we don't have to suffer in the way Jeremiah suffered in his relationship with Yahweh. Yet, in other ways we still feel insignificant when it comes to God – or the risen Jesus – relating to us. To quote Deutero-Isaiah, we're nothing but a bunch of maggots, maggots who'll eventually get into heaven if we follow all the proper rules and regulations, but still not very important individuals.

Perhaps that's why we should listen carefully to today's other two readings.

Paul certainly operates off the idea that we're very important people, not necessarily because of what we've accomplished, but because Jesus thought us important enough to die for. He reminds the Christian community in Rome of one of his most compelling beliefs. "If by the transgression of the one (Adam) the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many." If Jesus is convinced we're significant, how can we disagree?

Fifteen or more years later, Matthew still thinks it's necessary to remind his church of their importance. They're the special people entrusted to "proclaim from the housetops" the message they've received from the risen Jesus. Should they have doubts about being so privileged, the evangelist points out that the one who takes such good care of sparrows will certainly take care of them. (Considering my baldness, I normally ignore commenting on God counting the hairs of my head. Doesn't take him/her long to carry that out.)

Maybe the most serious sin we can commit isn't denying that God exists, but denying that God actually cares for us. Our biblical authors are convinced that if God exists, then God cares. If Jeremiah, with all his problems, never went far enough to definitively deny God's care, then who are we to question it?

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JULY 2ND, 2017: THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
 II Kings 4:8-11, 14-16a Romans 6:3-4, 8-11 Matthew 10:37-42

As a kid, I often daydreamed about dying a heroic death. Especially with the rise of atheistic Communism in the late 40s and early 50s, I imagined being martyred for my faith. That kind of death best imitated the deaths of the saints I frequently heard about in my catechism classes and the pastor's Sunday sermons. And, more than anything, it mirrored the unjust death Jesus endured for all of us.

But the older I got, the more I began to understand there are deaths, and then there are deaths. Though, as Paul reminds the Romans in today's second reading, all of us are expected to "die with Christ," few of us will actually be martyred because of our faith. The vast majority will live rather humdrum lives and our obituaries won't contain any "front page" material. That's why today's first and third readings are so important. They were written for us "humdrummers."

According to both the author of II Kings and Matthew, one way to die is to help those people of faith who aren't experiencing such a colorless life – especially prophets. Since, by nature, individuals who minister as the conscience of the people aren't normally received with open arms by the majority of the "faithful," one risks a lot by helping them. Yet that's exactly what the unnamed Shunemite woman does for Elisha and also what Matthew's Jesus encourages us to do for the prophets in our midst. Of course, according to both authors, we can anticipate some sort of compensation for identifying with such community outcasts. Elisha, for instance, promises the childless woman a son, and the gospel Jesus assures us, "Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward."

Lest we're limited only to surfacing and helping prophets, that same gospel pericope also mentions other ways to die. "Whoever receives a righteous person because she or he is righteous will receive a righteous person's reward." And on an even broader level, "Those who give only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because that little one is a disciple – amen, I say to you, they will surely not lose their reward."

But perhaps the broadest way to die is contained in the classic biblical contradiction, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my (Jesus') sake will find it."

Almost 50 years ago the well-known theologian Fr. David Tracy delivered a lecture at St. Louis University's Divinity School which still "haunts" me. Entitled *The Limitations of Theological Language*, it explored the impossibility of referring to God and our relationship with such an infinite person in language we finite humans can actually understand. Tracy's conclusion: it's pretty nigh impossible to do that. We're often relegated to speaking about such life-changing experiences in contradictions. He employed the above quote about losing and finding one's life as an example.

Maybe that's the one way each of us can experience a daily martyrdom for our faith. We die to our own logic and agree to suffer the death of stepping into God's contradictions. By doing so, we're actually imitating Jesus' martyrdom for us.

During his earthly ministry he constantly gave himself for others, convinced it was the only way for anyone to experience God working effectively in their daily lives. Of course, as we all know, his selfless giving eventually led to the biggest faith contradiction of all: his crucifixion and resurrection.

At the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples before his Good Friday death, he pleaded with them to carry on his ministry. I presume only those who can live within contradictions are able to successfully pull that off.