

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Aug. 30, 2020

Holding Misery and Hope Together

Texts: Jer 20:7-9; Rom 12:1-2; Mt 16:21-27

Offered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

Oh my! We have some strong feelings expressed in today's texts! What are we to make of them? How do they relate to us?

Let us attend first to our dear Jeremiah. If not completely angry, he certainly is fully frustrated! "You have enticed me," he says to God, "and I let myself be enticed!" And all he gets from this relationship, he tells us, are threats and beatings and being placed in stocks for everyone to laugh at him and to look at him with hate! Interestingly, the Hebrew word for *enticed* can also be translated as *seduced, deceived or duped*. Imagine Jeremiah yelling out God: "You have *duped* me, and I *let myself* be duped!" There is no doubt that he is mad, frustrated and torn about this God relationship, and with good reason!

Jeremiah was born in 650 BCE and his life spanned a time when Israel was in very deep crisis. The Jewish people were threatened first from the southwest by the Egyptian troops against whom the Jews went to war. Then, later, they were completely conquered by the Babylonian Empire coming from the East. Many of the resisting Jewish people were killed and the rest were forced to walk hundreds of miles into exile. Even worse, the Temple was destroyed, its treasures stolen and the Jewish faith totally dishonored.

Some of the Jewish leaders who stayed in Israel began to accommodate to their conquerors, leaving behind the Covenant they had with God and began to worship the gods of their subjugators. But Jeremiah stayed committed. He is tempted to give in, but, then *IT* comes, like fire burning in his heart, his prophetic call to continue to proclaim the fidelity of God no matter *what* the crisis. He doesn't quit. Like all of his laments, he holds anger and love together. He endures and he moves forward into action.

The author of Matthew's Gospel gives us the second dramatic scene this morning! At this precise point in the narrative, Jesus begins to intensify the formation of his disciples by turning them toward Jerusalem. In due time, he tells them, they are going to *lose* him, their treasured Prophet and Rabbi and Healer, to an ignominious death – and all that because he has proclaimed a new way of living, a new realm of love that is inclusive. Simon Peter, the very fellow who was commended for his faith just before this event and called *the Rock*, disputes what Jesus says, believing that such a thing simply could *never* happen. In response, Jesus *snaps* at him and calls him Satan – a tempter, an obstacle, a stumbling block.

Imagine going from being called *Rock* to *Satan* within just a few days. There is an intentional play on words here: Peter as **rock** or foundation stone and Peter as

stumbling block, a stone on the road as an obstacle. In other words, as Matthean scholar Donald Senior puts it. (*Invitation to the Gospels*, p. 65.), Peter is as “one who stands in the way by making judgments from the wrong perspective.” Paul tells the Romans, and us today, how to come to judgment from the *right* perspective. Yes, the disciples are now in for intensified formation. They move now beyond their novice state to be readied for their own practice of proclaiming, teaching and healing and *to endure* in hard times.

These words proclaimed this morning are of course *for us*, the followers of Jesus *today*. Our times too are in crisis with intersecting problems: 1) climate crisis producing fires and flooding; 2) COVID-19 creating depression, isolation and dying alone; 3) structural racism that excludes and leads to murderous deaths and destruction; 4) homophobia; 5) refugees in flight; 6) child abuse and sex trafficking; 7); death penalty executions renewed; 8) inequitable economic distribution leading to massive wealth for the very few and extreme poverty for the *very, very, very* many; and 9) political chaos that threatens the very existence of democratic institutions by driving divisions among people instead of bringing us together.

Like Jeremiah, we have the right, I think – and maybe even a *call* – to lament today, to be *angry* and *worried* and *sad*. But we *also* know that the very essence of *lament* is to hold *doubt and faith, misery and hope, and anger and love* together! We can be Peters and Petras too, wanting only the good times to be ahead of us. But we *also* know that God’s own suffering in Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word holds *all suffering and death* and turns it in due time into the *fullness of Life and Love*. This truth must be for us, though by *no means* a passive faith. Jesus asks us to take up our crosses too and to counter injustice with thoughtful and committed collective action for more and more inclusion. There is no such thing as an individual – despite the American doctrine of the “rugged individualist” – for we are *all* in relationship with each other, our Earth and our ever-loving God.

So, let us join with the people of Detroit tomorrow as they lament the more than 900 COVID deaths of the city in a drive by on Memorial Drive on Belle Isle! Let us participate fully in the *Season of Creation* initiative, beginning on Sept. 1 and continuing to Oct. 4, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. This is an ecumenical endeavor, calling on Earth’s 2.2 billion Christians to care for our Earth and each other. Let us all care for each other with exquisite kindness these days, bearing each other’s burdens from the very love of God, burning, like Jeremiah, in our very bones. And, FINALLY, let us all vote as both our civic and religious obligation to “form a more perfect union,” to increase our *own* sight so that we “see” and accept *all* who are already in the “Beloved Community” from God’s perspective!