

Twenty second Sunday (A) Jer 20:7-9, Rom 12:1-2, Mt 16:21-27- 2020

A pastor was tired of being pounded by angry people. He had sent letters to over a thousand parish families who had contributed nothing to the parish over the past 24 months. He did not chastise. He kindly asked those families that, if they truly considered themselves parishioners, they would please try and support their parish to whatever degree they could. The responses he received in return were mean and unchristian. How dare he try to tell people what to do with their money!

Then this same pastor had recently given a Sunday homily against the death penalty just prior to an execution at the state prison. He had spoken about what it means to be pro-life, what it means to believe that life is sacred, what it means to believe that God is author of all life. This was too much for some in his parish. A group of parishioners quickly circulated a petition asking the bishop to remove the pastor. Their complaint was that the pastor had mixed politics and religion, and they did not want to hear politics from the altar.

Already feeling that he could do nothing right, he was stunned when he received a call from his bishop telling him about the petition. The bishop wanted the pastor to come to the chancery in the late afternoon to talk about the sermon.

The priest sat down and wrote a letter of resignation as pastor of his parish. He felt it would be so much better if he could just step away from parish life and take a ministry somewhere else.

Letter in hand the pastor entered the bishop's office. To his absolute surprise the bishop said, "Congratulations! With your homily on the death penalty, I think you have done the best preaching you've ever done!"

Confused, the priest said he had come to apologize to the bishop for stirring up trouble and that he had his letter of resignation in hand. The bishop laughed and said, "Put your letter in your pocket. I'm taking you to dinner. I wish more of our pastors had your courage."

"But," said the pastor, "my parish is upset and parishioners are clearly very angry with me." The bishop responded, "Tough being Jeremiah, isn't it?"

The responsibilities that come with being Christian are heavy. To be a follower of Jesus Christ means learning how to practice sacrificial love. We must do what is right, and many times we'll be put on a cross for it. Far too often, too many Christians want to take the easy path in life. They want to hear feel-good messages in church, hear music that tells them how good and blessed they are, and they want it for free and without responsibility.

This is the message of our day: "Don't tread on me." We don't want to hear about responsibility, accountability and discipline. At least we do not want to hear those words spoken about us. Every bad thing is someone else's fault, and it is always up to someone else to fix our problems. We want our city to cut spending as long as cutbacks don't affect me and my family and our trash pickup.

Jesus tells us today that if we are going to follow Him, we must take up the cross. The cross is a difficult thing to understand. Jesus carried a physical cross made of a wood that was an instrument of pain, torture, fear and ultimately death. But that cross also brought forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation, love and life. But what is this cross that Jesus is telling us we must take up. Jesus is speaking of our spiritual life.

The cross is different for each one of us. Maybe the cross is a physical ailment, perhaps it is that we are getting older, and stuff does not work the same way any longer. Maybe we have an illness of some kind. Perhaps that cross is the person sitting right next to you in the office or workplace. Maybe you married your cross. Whatever the cross is, I think it changes as we develop our spiritual life, and we have to carry it as best we can. Maybe like Jesus we need help from time to time to carry that cross. Maybe we need to put it down or ask another to share the burden with us, so we can recover our strength to carry it again. Whatever we need to do we do not have a choice if we are going to be followers of Christ.

A small child spoke about his mom how she prepared breakfast and dinner regularly even when totally tired. One night after a long, hard day at work his mom placed a plate of eggs, sausage and extremely burned biscuits in front of his dad. The boy was waiting to see if anyone noticed. Yet all his dad did was reach for his biscuit, smile at his mom and asked the child how his day was at school. The child never remembered what he told him that night, but did remember watching him smear butter and jelly on that biscuit and eat every bite. When he got up from the table that evening, he heard his mom apologize to his dad for burning the biscuits. And he never forgot what he said: "Honey, I love burned biscuits." Later that night the child went to kiss Daddy good night and he asked him if he really liked his biscuits burned. He wrapped him in his arms and said, "Your Momma put in a hard day at work today and she's really tired. And besides – a little burnt biscuit never hurt anyone!" Life is full of imperfect things....and imperfect people. We are not the best at hardly anything, and forget birthdays and anniversaries just like everyone else. But what we learn over the years is that learning to accept each other's faults – and choosing to celebrate each other's differences – is one of the most important keys to creating a healthy, growing, and lasting relationship. Then our prayer should be that we learn to take the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of your life and lay them at the feet of God. We could extend this to any relationship. Let us not put the key to your happiness in someone else's pocket – keep it in our own." And this is the Good News of today.

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