

**21 June 2020**

**Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Jeremiah 20:10-13; Matthew 10:26-33*

In the first reading, Jeremiah the prophet knows what is good and true and people plot against him because of it. When all the world it seems is against him, he clings to God for strength: “But the Lord is with me like a mighty champion. My persecutors will stumble; they will not triumph.” **Have you ever felt like that? I have to admit that I have not.** Oh, I have disputes and disagreements and can feel persecuted, but I’m really not. I saw oppression a lot last Fall in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. More than once the **Palestinian bus** I was one was stopped by Israeli soldiers, and all the passengers were taken off the bus and frisked—all except me. Do you wonder why? I know you know it was the color of my skin. So, I don’t know—I have to imagine—what it’s like to be pulled over at random and stand at the mercy of a man or woman with a gun who is searching my pockets.

**So much of the Bible, however, is written for those who are oppressed**, under the heels of powerful people and treated unfairly. To stand with them, even if that is not our experience, is to stand with them in faith that Love, and Peace, and Justice will come to pass one day because God, not human oppressors, will triumph. It’s good to keep that in mind as we ask the question “**Where is God in all these protests about racism?**” **And to keep in mind also Abraham Lincoln’s wisdom** the goal isn’t to have God on our side but for us to be on God’s side.

**How do we get on God’s side?** Well, one obstacle to getting on God’s side that we hear repeated in the Gospel is **FEAR**. Fear no one...Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul...even all the hairs on your head God has counted—you are precious to God—so don’t be afraid.

I think there are a few **different levels of fear**. One the Gospel talks about—**bodily fear**. I remember climbing a tree at Rock Dam County Park by Thorp. It was next to the water, fairly deep water because it was next to the dam, and kids would climb really quite high—I’m gonna say 25 feet—and jump off of it. I did it, after much hesitation at the time, not so much because I was courageous but because I had the greater fear of being ridiculed by my pals. But, yes, there was some courage, too. It’s the same kind of courage Matthew, a junior at UW—Stout had when he began the year with a resolution he announced to all of the Newman group: “This year I’m gonna go for it!” He meant he would ask women out on dates. He’s married now, so I guess he found the courage well enough. **So for those kinds of things, we confront fear—and it can really help if we think it is God’s will and God will give us strength.**

Then there’s a **more subtle but more powerful fear in us**. I’ll call it “**Ego Fear**.” We construct a certain image of ourselves that we feel good about. “I’m a good person.” “I’m a moral person.” “I am correct in my views about the world.” We fear losing that self-estimation more than we fear jumping off a twenty-five-foot tree. I mentioned during my Wednesday talk that about ten years ago at my parish school we put on a spring show that featured our elementary school students singing Broadway songs, in costume to match the songs. One of the songs from set in Mexico, so the students had serapes and sombreros and when the boy students turned to face the crowd, they had oversized moustaches made of construction paper taped to their faces. I thought it was cute; I giggled. It turns out that two parents were deeply offended by that and made a big deal out of what they saw as a racial/ethnic stereotype. Now, my ego told me I was a sensitive, inclusive man, not a racist, and so I had a very hard time ingesting the criticism. We met a couple times. I tried hard to understand and learn, but at the time I just didn’t see it as offensive as they did. Why? I think that unconsciously I was afraid. My self-image as

a good person was at stake. **It's not fear of jumping off a wall—it's a different kind of fear—but it's the kind of fear that really hurts our world.**

**If you're right, then I'm bad. V. If you're right, I'm wrong.**

To counter that fear, Jesus grounds us in being precious not because of what we think or do but because every hair on our head is counted. Ideally, we can ground our identity in that and that alone and not on being a “good person,” and then we are more open to God, and to the Truth that sets us free. **The only identity we need to cling to is “Beloved Child of God.”**

Last, after all this about not being afraid, perhaps you noticed that Jesus also tell us in this Gospel passage that we SHOULD be afraid. What? Yes indeed. We should be afraid of losing our soul. Be afraid of whatever can take your soul.

Lucinda Williams wrote a song last year called “Man Without a Soul.” It includes the lines. “You’re a man without Truth. You’re a man of greed, a man of hate. You bring nothing good to this world. There’s no light I your eyes. You’re a man without a soul.” Can you feel the dread of being like that? I can, and it’s chilling. Fear that.

We should fear having our self-centeredness, our selfish fears or ego fears get so in the way of hearing the voice of God that waters our souls. The voice of God that says, “You are precious to me for who you are and for who you can be. **You might not perceive everything clearly now, but stay humble, listen to others with an open heart, stand with people who are suffering and let them stand by you. And you will not lose your soul. You will know the joy of communion.** And when you see what was once hidden, you will shout it from the housetops.