

Witnessing and Fear

12th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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

An elderly woman named Maude had a window seat on a big 747 that had just taken off for Rome. She had been saving for years to fulfill her dream to visit the eternal city. But it was her first flight and she was terrified. Even the stately presence of four bishops seated behind her didn't help. With fear and trembling she finally opened her eyes and peeked out the window, just in time to see one of the plane's four engines break loose from the wing and disappear into the clouds. "We're going to die!" she cried out. "We're going to die!"

The flight attendant consulted with the pilot who announced to the passengers that everything was under control, that they could fly back to New York and land safely on three engines. But Maude continued to cry out, "We're going to die!" The flight attendant went to her and said, "don't worry, my dear, God is with us. We have only three engines, but look, we have four bishops." To which Maude replied, "I'd rather have four engines and three bishops!" (1)

In today's gospel, Jesus continues his teaching to his apostles of discipleship and their ultimate ministry. Fear, or better described as courage under persecution, is the focus. This is not your everyday human fear; anxieties of money, relationships, illness, death flying or the multitude of other fears we encounter daily. While this does not make light of these human fears that are real and likely taking their tolls on us physically and emotionally, it is a different kind fear. This is a particular fear which Christians feel at the moment they must witness to their faith in God, to stand up for love and justice and mercy.

So it begs the question; are we afraid to be Catholic? Certainly not in here – it's easy to be unafraid as we are amongst those who have similar beliefs. But what about outside of this space? There are all kinds of injustices in the world, our region and even in our local communities, neighborhoods and even families. How do we handle these injustices? The temptation is to remain silent to not "rock the boat".

When we are called to witness to injustice many times we become fearful; and what are we fearful of? Do we fear losing a friendship, a relationship, a job, a house, a social status, or maybe even physical harm or in some cases something even worse? This is the human condition that Jesus calls us to go beyond and there is a very good example in Scripture on how Jesus handles this very fear.

Jesus' most profound moment of fear is addressed in His prayer to the Father at the Garden of Gethsemane; the agony in the garden. He knew what was coming, the pain, the suffering and the eventual death. Like all humans who may face such fear, the practical approach is to find a different way; to avoid the pain and suffering and Jesus was not immune to this. His agony was so profound and his prayer so fervent that his sweat became like drops of blood. While we do not have the exact words the Father

spoke to His Son, I am not sure it had anything to do with sparrows or hairs on his head – but likely the powerful message that his pain and suffering, while profound, would be short lived, ultimately providing the greatest good our world has ever encountered. Most important it is likely the Father reminded Jesus that while his human acquaintances would abandon him, he would not be alone.

For most of us, we are not called to suffer as Jesus did, but there may be times in our lives that we have to be a martyr – die to a relationship, die to a job, die to a friendship, die to social status, die to a political position and to not be afraid of doing so nor the real or perceived consequences of our actions. For not being a martyr because of our faith will surely maintain our earthly body, but will kill our soul.

This weekend we celebrate Father’s Day, a day to celebrate our fathers. We all hope that our fathers will be like our heavenly Father, to guide us, to protect us, to send angels when necessary. But because our fathers are human, they too can succumb to the fears of the world and sometimes may fail to acknowledge Jesus before others. Doesn’t necessarily make them bad, but human, needing the same kind of prayers and love we all need.

While we give a shout out to our earthy fathers, let’s make sure we acknowledge our heavenly Father who demonstrated his love, guidance and devotion to his Son, the same kind of love, guidance and devotion he has for us day in and day out; our ability to have courage under persecution. For ultimately our desire is to have Jesus acknowledge us before his heavenly Father and for us hear in a similar way, the words the Father had for his Son as he emerged from the waters of the Jordan:

This is my beloved Son; this is my beloved daughter of whom I am well pleased!

Deacon Tom Sheehan
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(1) The story Maude comes from “A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers” by William J. Bausch, copyright 1998 (Twenty Third Publications, Mystic CT).