

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Prophet Jeremiah, Saint Paul and Jesus”

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At first glance, whoever put together the three readings today has an interesting sense of humor. In the first reading from Jeremiah, we have this beautiful and poetic line of how God knew him and loved him before he was formed in his mother’s womb. St. Paul in the second reading gives us his beautiful exposé on faith, hope and love, and how the greatest of these is love. And in the Gospel reading, we have the mob ready to throw Jesus off a cliff. At first glance, these three readings combined seem a bit ironic, or worse, like a bad joke.

When we take the time to enter deeper into the readings however, there is something quite profound and rich going on. A little background on our first reading: Jeremiah was not a bullfrog. He was a great priest in service to King Josiah, the great King of Judah. Josiah is remembered for his reforms of Judaism during his time, rooting out idolatry and pagan influences from his land. Today’s rather optimistic reading was composed during this time. Josiah was tragically slain during a battle with an Egyptian army, commanded by Pharaoh Neco. With Josiah’s death, however, idolatry began to seep back into the kingdom. Jeremiah, however, continued Josiah’s efforts of purifying the nation’s religion with his preaching and writings.

Even after the worst thing that could ever happen to their country, the conquest by Nebuchadnezzar ushering in the Babylonian Exile, Jeremiah stayed true amidst the ruins of Jerusalem, still preaching, still writing. This, however, ultimately led to some upset people exiling him to Egypt. Legend has it: some disillusioned countrymen that were exiled with him murdered Jeremiah because they didn’t like his preaching. I hope no one here gets any ideas. There is a parallel though to what almost happened to Jesus in the Gospel reading isn’t there?

Jeremiah’s words were like balm for most of the people and the subsequent generation living in exile. His words today are still comforting. The Lord God says to his Chosen People, Stand up...Be not crushed, you are a pillar of iron, although your enemies will fight against you, although you are exiled and humiliated, your enemies will not prevail, do not let them prevail, I will deliver you says the Lord, because I love you says the Lord, before I formed you in the womb I knew you, says the Lord. These are words that give consolation to a people conquered by their enemies. They call us to persevere through hardship.

Moving on to our second reading, what is going on in the background in Corinth? The Christian community of Corinth is suffering from all kinds of divisiveness. Although they embraced Jesus as their Lord, they were not embracing each other. This problem is laid out in the very first chapter where Paul urges the people to have no divisions among them for it was reported to him by Cloe’s people that there were rivalries. Because this led to several celebrations of the Holy Eucharist in the town, between different groups of people, and to Paul’s frustration, between different classes of people, Paul teaches that at

the heart of the celebration of Eucharist is Christian unity. Therefore chapter 11 of Paul's letter specifically deals with what the celebration of Eucharist is meant to be, recalling the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. The next following chapter, chapter 12, articulates what a Eucharistic people look like: one Body of Christ. Although there are many parts, we are still one body. What should our behavior in this body of Christ look like Corinthians? Well, enter in this Sunday's second reading from Corinthians chapter 13, without love I am nothing. These words must have stung the Corinthians' ears. Without love you are nothing. Corinthians, you have missed the boat and your worship has become pointless because you do not have love. This reading is an important reminder to us today in how we treat each other.

We move to our Gospel reading where Jesus is led to the brow of a cliff by a rather unloving mob eager to throw him over. What is happening here? Jesus upset the crowd by saying Elijah and Elisha were not sent to save their countrymen. They were sent rather to save foreigners, outsiders, and gentiles. "When the people heard this they were filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of town and led him to the brow of a hill to hurl him down headlong." They were not ready for God's universal plan to save humanity through Jesus Christ. They had a too narrow view of what it meant to be the chosen people. This is, in a way, very much like the problem that St. Paul had at Corinth, except in the Gospel reading, the Nazoreans believed God only loved the people of Israel. They were not ready for Jesus' universal call to love.

What are we to do about these three readings? I think the three reading, together, challenge us to consider how far reaching the love of God is and to be challenged by the message to persevere in our practice of Christian love, even when we do not feel like it...especially when we do not feel like it. The human person comes in so many shapes, sizes, colors and tongues. All of us, however, are made in God's image and likeness. God knew us even before we were formed in our mother's wombs. And this has profound pro-life implications, by the way, and a biblical warrant for the sanctity of human life from the moment of conception until natural death and every stage and demographic in between. In the reading from Jeremiah today, God encourages those who suffer from injustices, to be not crushed, do not allow yourself to be crushed, I will deliver you says the Lord. Persevere in faith, hope and love. Enter St. Paul, avoid forming factions in the one body of Christ, God wants us to persevere as a people of faith, hope and love, no matter what happens, even after everything else in life is taken away. In the Gospel reading, we are reminded that Jesus' offer of salvation reaches around the world and back again, and every place in between. The nets have been cast out. How many fish are welcome? All of them! All of them! God perseveres in his love for us. Jesus teaches us how far that love goes.

And so, fellow Corinthians, let's have a practice run at this. Let's see how far along we are on this faith, hope and love business. Take a moment and think of the hardest person or groups of persons that you can ever imagine having to pray for. No one is asking you to like them; it is faith hope and love we are talking about, not faith hope and like. It is easy to confuse these concepts, love and like. Take Jesus on the cross for example. I don't think he liked the people who were hammering the nails, but he sure

loved them. He loved them. There is a difference. “Like” is more of a feeling. “Love” is more like a choice.

With that insight, take a moment and think of the hardest person or groups of persons that you can ever imagine having to pray for. It is hard isn't it? It is very hard, at least for me anyway especially in our country and world today as divided as it is. This can be downright near impossible for those who have been really hurt by someone in particular. Wounds have a hard time healing. Sometimes the most we can do is to pray for the grace to forgive someone who has hurt us. Do we dare attempt this in our prayers? Have we ever tried? If we do this, the Word of God might indeed become fulfilled in our hearing, our understanding of God's idea of salvation might just expand a bit, and we will be forgiven by the measure we forgive others. We will at last exchange our citizenship of a divisive Corinthian world for citizenship in the Kingdom of God. This citizenship we claim has significant ramifications on how I treat my family members, my relationships at work, and at school. It also has ramifications on how I view my country, different political parties, and world events. We can ask ourselves, in a Kingdom where faith, hope and love matter most, what does that now require of me this coming week?