

[Readings: Jer. 1:4-5, 17-19; Ps 71; 1 Cor. 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30]

Jeremiah was perhaps the most melancholy and persecuted of all the great Old Testament prophets. His was a sad existence, being labeled a trouble-maker, a liberal and even insane by his detractors. Yet our First Reading is message of hope. No matter how big the enemy is, no matter how hard the battle will be; if we are doing what is right and true, God will be with us to defend us, to support us, and to help us win the good fight. The job description of the prophet and for us, isn't promising: Everyone is going to fight you, and indeed at some point we might throw in the towel and tell God it's all too much. The promise of God, though, is to be with us through all our trials. When we face a difficult but necessary task, remember that God has our back, too.

In today's Second Reading, St. Paul writes his beautiful poem about love in the most disgusting of circumstances. He has been beaten to an inch of his life, and now he sits chained to a prison wall, in a dark and moldy prison cell, probably with rats and other non-human guests scurrying across the floor in front of him. There is no peace in the new church he founded in Corinth. The people there are arguing with each other over who belongs to the most faithful community and who is the greatest leader among them. They are debating about what Jewish laws should be kept and which should be broken. They are even discussing what political influence the young churches should have.

St. Paul, weary from his persecution and weary from hearing such bad news, writes a poem about love which is so inspiring and so long-lasting that most engaged couples choose this passage for their wedding ceremony in the Catholic and other Christian communities. From the suffering and death of imprisonment comes the Resurrection and new life of genuine Christian love. From the suffering and death of his prison cell comes Resurrection and new life in the gift of love. Why would St. Paul put love ahead of faith and hope? A wise priest-mentor had the simple answer. He told me, because when you die, your faith and hope are no longer necessary. You don't need to believe in God, because God will be right in front of you.

You don't have to hope in God, because God will judge you right then for how you lived your life on earth. Only the love you shared in this world will accompany you in the next. That's what Patrick Swayze tells Demi Moore in the final scene of the movie "Ghost." "All the love inside of you... You take it with you." That's one statement of faith and morals that Hollywood got right!

The cure to all the noise around us of hate, bigotry, prejudice, injustice and anger, Saint Paul tells us, is more and ever-increasing love. Love till it hurts, love while it hurts, and love after it hurts. That's what Jesus did, even as His own friends and neighbors tried to throw Him off a cliff! Love, mind you, is not silly or foolish. It does not stay in harm's way, in an abusive relationship, or embrace injustice for the sake of love. It struggles always to live in truth and with integrity.

So how do we put Paul's word to work today? Start by thinking of one hurt you've endured at work or home recently, and ask yourself whether you responded in love. In other words, were you patient, kind, and not quick-tempered or brooding? If you can answer yes, then congratulations, you have found a most excellent way to love. And to live.

Finally, we have today's Gospel. The home town of Jesus is divided in two. Half the people believe the words of Jesus and accept the fact that He needs to bring the Good News beyond familiar borders. The other the other half of the village of His home town didn't want Him to leave them.

I remember after my ordination, during my first year of priesthood I returned to my home parish in Detroit for a few special functions and events. Each time, I would hear these people who called me to priesthood, who supported my vocation and who encouraged me in the seminary say to me, "Fr. Nick, wouldn't it be great for you to come back here as our pastor?" My answer was always the same: "Not for all the tea in China!" You see, I knew everything about the parish -- the good, the bad and ugly. What was worse, is that they knew the good, the bad and the ugly about ME, and that would make things difficult and affect my credibility and effectiveness as a pastor!

What does Jesus do when He is confronted with the same dilemma and with an explosive crowd? Does He take up a weapon to defend Himself? Does

He go running to His Blessed Mother to hide behind her? No. Jesus passes right through the midst of them and goes away, to others who will listen with open minds and open hearts. He faces His challenge head on. He realizes that His suffering, death and rising more than likely will be a daily cross, and that this more than likely will be a daily comfort to sustain and strengthen Him.

Where are you and I in this faith picture? Is there a major battle ahead of us? Is there division in our community or in our family? Or are the very challenges of life itself the same daily cross Jesus encountered and which we now encounter? Ultimately, it will be the love that we share with others which will help us, as Archbishop Vigneron says, "share Christ in and through the Church." To "Unleash the Gospel" in the world around us, in our homes and in our parish.

One way this is being done is by a group of dedicated parishioners who make up our Stephen Ministry. Back in 1985, St. Martin de Porres Parish had the distinction of being the first parish in the Archdiocese of Detroit to bring the Stephen Ministry into our parish. It is a ministry of support and encouragement for our parishioners during times of difficulty and loneliness. They join us this weekend to renew their commission, and to ask us to re-commit ourselves to supporting them.

This is also Boy Scout Sunday. We honor and celebrate the boys and young adults who stand for all that is good in our country. To live lives of virtue. To learn to appreciate what is good, true and beautiful. To be of service to others.

We offer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick at the end of this weekend's Saturday 5:00 Mass to those who give witness to their faith, their hope and their love of the Lord through the cross of physical, mental, or spiritual crosses which they do not carry alone, but bear with the Lord Jesus Christ. He reminds us "For I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." AMEN!

[Readings: Isaiah 6:1-2, 3-8; Psalm 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11]

Ask a group of people to name a biblical prophet, and the most common answer will likely be Isaiah. Isaiah owes his popularity to having been a writing prophet (unlike Elijah and Elisha, who left their legacy in the hands of storytellers), and to having been darn good at his craft. He is the prophet most quoted and set to music, and most of us can probably recite something he wrote: "Comfort, comfort O my people," "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares," "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," "For unto us a child is born," "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord" --just for starters. Even Jesus quoted Isaiah: "For my house shall be a house of prayer." If you want an Old Testament prophecy, Isaiah is the go-to guy.

But read Isaiah when he speaks about himself, and you get a different sense of the man: "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips," he declares. It takes a burning coal from heaven applied to his mouth to remove his wickedness. Pardon me, but if Isaiah had to have HIS mouth washed out with fire, what chance do you and I have?

Then there's Paul of Tarsus, the apostle to the Gentiles, the man who wrote the lion's share of the New Testament and laid the foundation for the church's self-understanding for these many centuries. He also famously suffered imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, and eventual beheading for his faith. What place does Paul claim in the eternal scheme of things? "I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle." If Paul is unfit to be sent by God, then you and I probably shouldn't even volunteer.

Look at Simon Peter, one of the Lord's best friends, appointed to wield the keys of the Kingdom, and given the chair of apostolic succession. He was the clear leader of the 12 apostles and would remain at the head of the Church through its first generation. His successors would continue to govern the Church under his name. Peter, too, would face martyrdom by crucifixion, proving Jesus' teaching that no servant is greater than the master.

What does Peter have to say about his worthiness? “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” he says, on his knees. So there’s the tally of three of the most prominent names in the Bible: a doomed and unclean man, one unfit to serve, and a sinner uncomfortable to be in the Lord’s presence. Not a worthy fellow among them!

None of this should lead us to despair of our chances to be a prophet, servant, or leader for that matter. It merely suggests that the idea of worthiness is something we should relegate to the mothballs. If we think being good will make us worthy before God, we are fooling ourselves big-time. If we think bankrolling extra prayers, being generous to charities, or even laying down our lives will mean that God owes us a place in Heaven, we’ve got it all very wrong.

The key to the issue is in the centurion’s words that we pray a version of at every Mass. According to the story, the centurion has a dying slave most dear to him, and those around Jesus urge him to assist this Roman because, as they say, “He deserves to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation and he built a synagogue for us.” In other words, here is a man surely worthy of a miracle. Yet the humble centurion sends word to Jesus from a distance: “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed.”

Jesus marvels at his faith. Jesus doesn’t marvel at anyone else’s faith in all four gospels, so this is noteworthy. And the man’s servant is healed as he requested. It is for this, then, that we pray at each Mass: not to be made worthy, because that is beyond us, but simply to be healed; or as we used to say, that our souls would be healed.

Worthiness is an attribute of God. But God can bestow on us the grace to stand without fear in the divine presence because God’s mercy makes up for any shortfall on our part. God’s angel purged Isaiah’s lips so that he could pour out the wealth of beautiful words ascribed to him.

And Paul admits that, “By the grace of God, I am what I am, and God’s grace to me has not been ineffective.” One of my favorite New Testament quotes. I say it in the positive: “God’s grace to me has been effective.”

Peter is indeed a sinful man, but Jesus tells him not to be afraid of his insufficiency. Nor should we be afraid or reluctant to come forward all the way to the Lord’s Table, because God’s grace is always greater than our faults, and it’s all we need.

The call of God in our lives is at once a call to the most profound and to the most practical. Though the invitation of God is to give our whole selves, the manner of our response is typically focused on small, specific actions -- right where we live. To what in my life do I need to say, “Here I am, Lord”?

To the child who’s having a rough time in school or with friends, and could use loving attention?

To the lonely neighbor who could use a kind friend to listen patiently to the details of his or her life?

To letting go an old resentment that is poisoning my heart?

To the challenge of forgiving someone who hurt me; or to the task of apologizing to someone I have hurt?

To a distant relative who would love to get a cheery letter, card, or e-mail?

To a situation I’ve been procrastinating about that needs me to be strong and courageous?

To the inner voice of creativity that feels stifled?

To a recurring habit of sin that I need to bring into the light of God’s love?

Like Isaiah, Paul, and Peter, we all feel unworthy to the task God calls us to. But we are not alone. With God’s help, we can do whatever we are called to do. Be not afraid. AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 17: 5-8; Psalm 1; 1 Cor. 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26]

There are two kinds of people, as the saying usually begins. And Scripture tends to bear this out with numerous points of comparisons between the just and the wicked, or the wise person and the fool. Today's readings cluster around the contrasting of those who are blessed versus those who are cursed. Although such black-and-white distinctions seem harsh in our typically grey perception of reality, biblical language is quite clear that we must expect a time of foreclosure known as Judgment Day, when the tipping point has been reached and the chance to change our course is behind us.

Judgment Day can be variously interpreted as simply the end of our lives, or more emphatically the end of time and world itself. Jesus spoke of his "hour" as both a kind of revelation and also a proving ground for who he was. Maybe we can think of Judgment Day as our "hour," when we find out who we truly are based on the summation of all our choices.

But many of us would certainly like to end the suspense and know as soon as possible what may be the last word on the subject of *us*. If you want to take your spiritual pulse right now, the prophet Jeremiah suggests, it's fairly easy. If you place your trust in people and things, you'll be sorry. If your trust is in God, you have nothing to fear.

The prophetic and wisdom traditions both agree that the issue of which side you're on is cut-and-dried. You're either a "barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste" (which can't be good), or you're a "tree planted beside the waters that shows no distress even in the year of drought" (which sounds much better). The only difference is whether your hope is rooted in God. All other distinguishing factors are meaningless.

So your accumulated stuff doesn't matter, and your good deeds won't make the grade. You can't brown-nose your way through this one just because you go to church, behave yourself, and write a check to the missions once in a while. Ultimately, you either trust in this world, your personal and spiritual resources, and the good opinion of others, or you place your confidence in God.

What makes this *good* news is that it's a path available to anyone. Even the diehard sinner can do this and end up planted next to the saints in Heaven by that same stream of living water. This news tends to make diehard sinners very happy and everybody else a little disgruntled. You mean, all that straight-and-narrow living doesn't buy any perks in the hereafter? You mean God doesn't owe me anything for passing up some great near occasions of sin? Exactly. It all relies upon God's mercy and grace.

An old Arab proverb says: trust in God, but tie your camel. Trusting in God does not mean living like an idiot and taking foolish chances. Jesus advised his disciples, "You must be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves." He also said that if you build your house on sand, don't be surprised when it washes away. The word used here is not simply *sand*, but a veritable *wash*: Don't build your house where the water habitually comes, or you are asking for trouble!

Jesus took His own advice when He met the devil in the desert. The devil urges Him to throw Himself off a pinnacle and to trust that God would keep Him safe. That's not a working definition of trusting in God, Jesus assures Satan. That's called tempting God!

What Jesus means by trusting in God is evident in the listing of the Beatitudes. Those who trust in God live out of the conviction that being poor, needy, sad, or despised now is the smallest and least important part of the story. What awaits those who suffer these conditions faithfully now is the day of restoration in the Kingdom of God.

Of course, the reverse is necessarily true. Those who are comfortable, content, and well-received now will be bitterly disappointed if they bank on their present happiness. In the Kingdom of God, those who counted on their own resources will find themselves penniless and wanting.

Somehow our idea of trusting in God has been reduced to a vague sentimental feeling, a soft emotion we keep next to our lucky socks and rabbit's foot. Or perhaps it's more like playing the celestial stock market. We put our trust in God in the waiting room at the hospital.



But if we don't get the results we wanted, we become outraged that God has been untrustworthy. This isn't trust: This is making just another worldly investment and anticipating a worldly outcome.

Saint Paul defines Christian hope down to precisely one element: our faith in the Resurrection. Either it's real, or we're fools to share in the story of the Church. Either Christ has been raised, or death is the winner-take-all at the end of history. Confidence in the Risen One is the barometer of our trust in the Lord. Do YOU believe? We say it every Sunday. We have to place all our hopes in the *big one*, the contest between death's finality and life unending. Because eternal life is the only thing worthy of our hope, when you come right down to it. Everything else goes to rust, moths, and decay, and in surprisingly short order.

Those who trust in God are blessed, and those who don't get a bad case of "the woes." This isn't just God playing Santa Claus at the end-times, by the way: It's a reality check. If we trust in God, we get the eternal happiness that only God can offer. And if we cling to the world, we get the world, complete with its expiration date. God takes our free will very seriously. It would be good if we did, too, and examined our choices more carefully.

Much of modern life, even in our Church, can seem, spiritually, like stretches of wasteland. Yet in even the bleakest surroundings, some people's spirits flourish and thrive. They stay connected to the sources of life. What can you do to "plant yourself" where living water flows? Here are a few ideas to show your trust in God: Receive the sacraments regularly. That means frequent Mass and Communion and regular participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Practice forgiveness both in the giving and receiving. Lose yourself serving others. We have Warming Center this week. May we see Jesus in our guests, and, more importantly, may our guests see Jesus in us! Pray daily, early and often. Offer hospitality to others. Share your faith with others whose faith is alive. Open your heart to grace throughout your day. Take God's hand and walk together. This is how we trust. And how it will keep us green and growing.  
AMEN!

[1 Sam 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; Psalm 103; 1 Cor. 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38]

Most of us have no quarrel with most of the teachings of Jesus. When He says love one another and welcome little children, and peace I leave with you, we find nothing difficult or objectionable in these sayings. Most of what Jesus has to say sounds like good moral advice or happy and reassuring thoughts. We're content to call Him Lord and follow his way when that way is congenial to the way we already want to go.

However, in the time of Jesus there were plenty of folks who were pleased to leave their jobs (which they didn't much care for anyway) and follow Him around (which occasionally led to a free lunch) and listen to His teachings (which confirmed what they already believed about rich people and religious leaders in general). And they continued to do so until they ran hard up against the so-called "harsh sayings" of Jesus, which were so displeasing that most of His followers turned on their heels and went home harrumphing about Him after that.

When Jesus tells us to be like the lilies and don't worry so much, we sigh and think it's a lovely idea. But when Jesus says love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and bless those who curse you, what are we to make of that? For some of us, at least, these sayings are so ridiculous and impossible to take seriously that we have to presume they've lost something in the translation. When Jesus says "enemies," He doesn't mean the people who intend us harm, obviously. And when He talks about "doing good" to people who hate us, surely He implies not actually being kind or thoughtful or helpful to them.

After all, it's the very definition of an enemy to be the person who's out to get you, and such a person is to be avoided or defeated at all costs. In certain cases, such a person should even be killed, we reason. So Jesus can't mean love your enemies. He must mean something else! Right? No, He doesn't!

We have grown used to qualifying and limiting our responsibility to the holy will of God. For example, when we practice compassion, we tend to reserve it for those who "deserve" our compassion. Such people didn't participate in the circumstances of their misfortune, for instance.

So we may extend compassion to a person who is ill because of exposure to asbestos, but not to a smoker who has lung cancer. We show mercy to the hurricane victim, but not to the alcoholic who has developed diabetes.

We may do the same with our forgiveness. We may forgive people who have wronged us and confessed their behavior and worked to amend the damage, but not the person who never says he or she is sorry. When we qualify our responses in this way, we are practicing human justice, but we are not imitating the Lord who felt compassion for the people of Jerusalem who would shout for His crucifixion the next day, or who forgave those who were in the act of putting Him to death because they were so ignorant.

When we practice human justice, expecting an eye for an eye, loving our friends and hating our enemies, repaying people in kind for what they do, nothing is accomplished according to the reign of God. The reign of God is extended when God's will is done and something truly divine is allowed to come to life among us. Heavenly justice is so much grander than just evening out the score; it enlarges our own hearts and vision when we have the courage to participate in it.

What would it have gained David to seize the moment and destroy his enemy Saul while he slept? It would have solved a problem he had, surely. It would have eliminated a man who was bent on killing him. But David has been anointed by a prophet to be a king, and that means he has to show a kingly sensibility about the origins and privileges of power. Knowing that a king rules by divine decree and not his own pleasure, David honors King Saul even in this dangerous hour. In turn, Saul perceives that David is indeed greater, more kingly, and more deserving of divine favor than he is himself. David grows in stature and grace in the eyes of his men, and even under the steady gaze of his enemy. David wins more than the life of his enemy in this encounter.

The only way we, too, can grow and expand in grace and knowledge of the ways of God is to practice them. When we do, the kingdom Jesus announced "leans" into view and into our reality, not simply through what is decent and legal

by earthly standards, but when we live by a higher rule altogether. When we get above who's right and who's wrong and stop judging and condemning others according to their actions, what we see from God's-eye view might astound us!

Daily life offers countless opportunities to put this Sunday's gospel into practice. Can I think of one clear-cut example from the past week in which I've loved an enemy or done good to someone who hates me? How about a recent time when I failed to do that?

Loving others does not mean being available for abuse. What have I learned in my life about being loving in the midst of conflict?

Often, seemingly loving behaviors are simply efforts at manipulation or a "quid pro quo" – I will do this for you if you do this for me. What can I do in my own life to make my actions more purely loving?

We may balk at the idea that we ought to adjust our response to be like God's because, after all, who among us is like God? We have to remember that love, compassion, and forgiveness are not about what we feel but how we choose. These are divine attributes and as such do not properly belong to us.

Even Jesus didn't say, "I forgive you," to His enemies from the cross; He asked God to forgive them. When our emotions don't line up with our Christian responsibility to be as God is, then we can choose to love and forgive not by our own weak and limited authority but by the limitless power of God. For God does indeed love those who have set themselves against God's own divine will; God does have mercy on those unworthy of compassion; and God does forgive those who are unforgivable. We don't have to look farther than in the mirror to know what that means for us. If we want to be counted as the children of God, adopting heavenly values is the quickest way to embrace that identity. Let's not pray for God to forgive us as WE forgive, but to forgive as GOD forgives! AMEN!