

[Readings: Jer. 20:7-9; Ps. 63; Rom. 12:1-2; Matt. 16:21-27]

There was a popular song several years ago, called, “Bad Day” by Daniel Powter. Some of its words are: “ ‘Cause you had a bad day, you’re taking one down, you sing a sad song just to turn it around...”

If you think YOUR life is a “Bad Day,” full of pain and struggle, look at the life of the prophet Jeremiah. Look at the life of St. Paul. Look at the life of Jesus!

Jeremiah faces devastating challenges in his prophetic ministry, summarized in today’s First Reading. Of all the major prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah has suffered physically, spiritually and emotionally the most. His message falls on either deaf or rebellious ears. He has been assaulted physically and verbally so many times, it’s hard to keep count. When I have a “bad day,” I can empathize with Jeremiah! Of all the prophets, I most identify with him!

He has now reached a point in his ministry when he says, “Enough! I give up!” His words which we hear today come from a despairing soul in prison. He has lost any of his worldly power, influence and wealth. He has nothing.

And in that dark despair he says, with wistfulness, maybe some anger, but also with a tender love: “You duped me, and I let myself be duped!” How many of us have fallen under the spell of love in a romantic relationship, in the depth of a close friendship, in the fellowship of fellow believers? We are “duped!”

We say things like, “You had me at ‘Hello!’” “I’m so glad to have you as a friend.” “Thank you for nurturing my faith-life.” “I couldn’t have done this without you.” That’s what Jeremiah says to the Lord. “I couldn’t stop from witnessing to Your truth, O Lord, or to Your message of faith, hope and love, even if I wanted to. When I say, ‘I’m going to be quiet in this situation. I will not speak up,’ Your Word sets my heart on fire. I can’t hold it in! I cannot endure that!”
Wow!

St. Paul, no slouch to suffering himself, says pretty much the same thing in our Second Reading. Look at HIS track record: arrested, beaten, stoned, in prison, shipwrecked, rejected. And yet he has the divine audacity to speak of the “mercies of God” and to tell those listening to his letter to offer what they do in this life as a living sacrifice. Go to work! Go to school! Go and shop! But let your every act be a statement of faith. Preach with the words of the way you live, and with the choices you make, beginning with respecting your body as a temple of the Holy Spirit!

While doing this, like Jeremiah, like Paul and like Jesus, you also may feel inner conflicts nonetheless. Can you want to believe, but also have significant doubts? Yes, you can. Has faith led you and me to take risks that now seem too risky or to make sacrifices that now seem too large? Have you ever felt “duped” by God? You betcha! Every time I read these words, I get a little emotional because I hear Jeremiah saying these words with love and not with disdain.

Have YOU been able to examine that feeling more closely and come to a deeper understanding of your life’s purpose? I have come to know my identity and my mission very clearly, and it’s to be a priest and to be here with you as your pastor! To give you my blood, sweat and tears... unfortunately it has been mostly sweat!

Have you ever sensed that a decision or commitment you made for the sake of the Gospel would bring you hardship or suffering, as Jesus predicted it would for Him? How have you been compensated for your sacrifices?

The world doesn’t have a clue as to how to live. Don’t give into it or be seduced by it. Have a successful career, but gain it ethically and morally. Make money, but remember where that money came from and return to the Lord and to the human family a generous and grateful portion of that financial blessing with a humble and grateful heart.

Accept the authority and power that have been given to you, but let it reflect the Divine Authority and Power that guides your lives. Listen to the divine authority and power that comes from the Church.

This world sings, "I haven't got time for the pain." Jesus Christ says, "Take up your cross and follow in the way I walked."

The world teaches, "Look out for Number One – YOU!" Jesus Christ says, "Deny yourself and follow me."

The world says, "Turn over an obscenely big profit!" Jesus Christ says, "What does it profit you to gain the whole world at the cost of your immortal soul?"

How radical and counter-cultural is THAT! 2000 years old and STILL timely!

Students and teachers are returning to school for another program year. I challenge every student and every teacher and every catechist listening to me to make THIS Priority Number One: the search for truth. Religion and science are not in opposition to each other. The truth is the truth, and both religion and science can and do teach each other. Religion and science must both serve the truth. Who is God creating me and calling me to be?

Priority Number Two: Never back down from the truth. Search for it, find it, and embrace it. Hold onto it.

Priority Number Three: Share it! At home, at work, in school, and yes, even in the church parking lot! Let God's truth renew your minds, that you may discern what is of God, what is "good and pleasing and perfect!" AMEN!

[Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95; Romans 13:8-10; Matt. 18:15-20]

Culture-wide, we have lost the art of conversation. There's no such thing as a thoughtful sharing of perspectives for the purpose of advancing understanding. Instead we have so-called "talk" shows: nothing more than shout-fests and diatribes in which we ridicule opponents and promote our own narrow agendas.

News reporting has become infected with the "get 'em" mentality. As the media skewers the latest celebrity, politician or religious leader, I feel less disgust for the individual under fire than the reporter and the intended consumers of these news items. The culture of contempt satisfies the triumphalist tendency in us. After watching the nightly news, we feel morally superior to most people -- especially those who set themselves up as our betters. Isn't that a great rush?

Instead of earnestly seeking to discover what makes those with whom we disagree tick, we throw them to the lions and enjoy the spectacle. And the occasion of sin grows and spreads to infect our relations across political parties, religious affiliations, ethnicity and race, and, of course most especially, borders.

Not learning to talk civilly to one another across our differences means diplomacy has no foothold. All we can imagine doing in the hour of conflict is to bomb the heck out of the other side.

A long time ago, Jesus argued, with good rabbinic tradition behind Him, to settle disputes as privately and reasonably as possible. "Talk to your brother," He advised. What a concept! Talk doesn't mean rant or disparage or shame or dominate. It means sharing and also listening. But as Jesus knew well, you can't begin to settle serious conflicts by jumping into a dialogue without special training. Today's Gospel is an extended prep course in how Christians should handle their differences.

A brief summary situates today's passage: Learn humility, love the lost one, talk to your brother or sister, and forgive without limits.

No talk show in the world would keep its ratings under those conditions!

How do you forge friendships in the love of Jesus Christ for God, others and yourself? All three readings wrestle with this question.

How do you deal with conflict when you see another doing something against the law of love, against the laws of religion, against the law of love for God, others and self? Ezekiel says that we have a moral obligation to challenge the other when they are doing sin or evil. Our salvation – as well as the salvation of the other – is at stake. Hate the sin, but still love the sinner.

First of all, nowhere in the New Testament Gospels will you find Jesus saying that the first order of things is always to be right. But He does have a great deal to say about forgiveness, about relationship, about reconciliation, about service and humility and vulnerability.

Paul says something remarkably rather simple today. In Romans, Paul shows off an idea as clear as water: “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another.” We owe each other love and nothing less. Where have we heard this before? Jesus summarizes the law and prophets in similar terms. Love God and each other as you love yourself. Whatever else you say about Christianity, it’s not rocket science. A Ph.D. in theology won’t get us closer to the ideal, and even a child (especially a child!) can show us how it’s done.

Keep this in mind when applying today’s readings with our daily living: how to deal with those who harm us, offend us or sin against us. Too often we approach this scenario as bringing vengeance on the wrongdoers. Jesus gives us a different approach.

First, confront them privately, one on one. This goes against our natural inclination to broadcast to everyone around us the bad thing that has been done. I have a priest friend who, when he enters a room, doesn’t say, “Hello.” He says, “I’ve got NEWS!” Try to resolve it one on one, without destroying the good name of the other. If that doesn’t work, bring backup witnesses to the offense. Today, we call this an intervention.

I have found this to be successful in turning the offending partner around. Often it is an emotionally-charged experience. Usually the offending party experiences guilt, remorse, shame and eventually conversion.

Now comes the tricky part. If all else fails, then you can make the offense public. If collective shaming doesn't do the trick, release them and be done with them! The Quakers call this "shaming." The Jews applied this in dealing with those who will not admit their guilt or change their behavior. Maybe this is where Jesus got the idea. But it is extreme.

This extreme option is not to keep the sinner away from the righteous or to avoid them like the plague. It is not about applying pressure to the situation until your opponent confesses that s/he did you wrong. It's based on winning back your brother or sister. Jesus actually uses the rabbinical term "gaining" them -- a term employed in missionary conversion. It's about restoring an intimate relationship to rights, not wringing justice from an enemy by turning up the heat.

They need time and distance to rethink and repent.

Remember this: How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He ate with them. He conversed with them. He welcomed them. He kept the door open. And so, as Jesus ate with tax collectors and Gentiles, we need to keep the doors open to win back the person who injures and offends us.

How do you handle disagreements and conflict in your professional and personal relationships? Do you confront them honestly or take a passive-aggressive approach? When people disagree with you and conflict arises, are you genuinely interested in reconciliation and resolution? If so, what are you doing to foster it?

Ezekiel says those in the know owe sinners a heads-up on their condition. That is part of the debt of love we owe to our neighbor, but it has to be handled with love and charity. We cannot wish evil on a neighbor, as Saint Paul says. If we want to live in a world full of neighbors and not enemies, we have to learn – or re-learn – how to listen to and how to talk to each other. AMEN!

Confirmation Enrollment/Catechetical Sunday

[Sirach 27:30-28:7; Psalm 103; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35]

Today's readings offer an uncomfortable, but clear challenge to us: the challenge of forgiveness. The first reading from the Book of Sirach reminds us to release or turn over to the Lord our anger and desire for vengeance, for it is God's role, not ours, to punish those who have done evil. We are not to be vengeful; we are to forgive. "The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail," Sirach writes. But as for us, we must forgive: "Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven."

It is important to remember, however, that forgiving another does not mean absolving them of responsibility. To forgive another is to confirm that they have done wrong and are in need of forgiveness. Mercy does not cancel out justice or the need for conversion, but it does open up a path of charity that encourages and promotes conversion and justice. For the Christian in the world, we live in mercy and we long for justice, but we entrust final justice (final conversion) always to God. As long as we believe in the power and mercy of God, we always hope for this.

I'm reminded of what a friend said to me recently: "I'm not in the revenge business. That's not in my job description. That's in God's job description!"

Another person told me, "I don't have the time and energy to invest in hate and resentment. It takes too much out of me."

Today, throughout the country, is Catechetical Sunday. Some catechists tell me that it's the hardest job in the world, like being thrown into the lion's den every week as a parish steward. Do you know what a parish volunteer is? One person describes it as someone who couldn't get away fast enough! Others describe it as a blessing, delving deeper and deeper into our relationship with Jesus and with the beauty that is the Catholic Church. The gift of teaching and preparing the future Church that will one day replace us all.

One catechist said, "Like most catechists, I plan careful lessons, spend far too much time creating original props I can't find in any catalog, and watch each week as plans to teach the heck out of some religious concept get derailed by factors beyond my control. I've finally determined the only good lesson plan boils down to One Big Idea. If I just say one thing across the hour -- write it, say it, make them repeat it, sing it, dance it -- with any grace it may stick, and students will learn it by heart.

This weekend we enroll our young people preparing for Confirmation. You who are candidates, this is a challenging time in your lives. Too old to be cute little kids and too young to be considered adults. And – Spoiler Alert – Confirmation doesn't make you an "adult" in the Church! If it did, you would be able to vote, drive a car, drink alcohol and join the military! Actually, Confirmation is your personal choice to be, to become and to live out the Catholic faith. With the divine help of the Holy Spirit.

I challenge everyone hearing my voice this day to discover two important things: who you really are, and what God wants you to be

when you grow up! Regardless of your age, we still are growing up! You are called to become a servant of the Lord. Our Second Reading says that when we live, we live for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord. Find your place in the Church now!

Here is the One Big Thing I want to teach all of you today: Jesus Christ is truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament, in His Most Holy Communion, in the Holy Eucharist most of us will be receiving soon. Jesus Christ is really here: Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Jean-Paul Sartre, a world famous atheist and anti-Catholic philosopher of the twentieth century, is credited with saying this: “If you Catholic really believed that Jesus Christ is truly present in your Eucharist, you would be crawling on your hands and knees coming up the aisle to receive Him!” An atheist who knows about the Real Presence better than some of us Catholics do!

If some of us do truly do not believe that Jesus Christ is not present here, then we need to ask “Why?” The answers come from you! I asked some of you, and these are the observations you have made. What you see some people doing during Mass encourages our participation or is an obstacle to it. Our behavior in church. Do you help create a prayerful silence before Mass begins, or are you a distraction to others? Do you participate in the Mass or are you a passive observer?

Do you pay attention to the Readings and Homily, or are you reading the bulletin? Do you fast before receiving Communion or are you chewing gum? Most importantly, do you believe what we do here, or does it become “Hocus Pocus!”

Did you know where that expression comes from? It comes from the sacred words in Latin which the priest says over the bread during the Consecration of the Mass: “Hoc est enim corpus meum!” These sacred words have been turned into a blasphemous phrase.

Here is our response to any doubts and disrespect during Mass: Over the centuries, several Eucharistic Miracles have happened, even as recently as the 1990's. A priest doubts while saying the words of the Consecration, and the outer signs of the Eucharistic host change. Someone irreverently takes a Communion wafer home to hide, but later repents and brings it back to the church. Only it has transformed into human body and blood.

Upon official, scientific investigation – one of them ordered by our current Holy Father Pope Francis when he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, -- it was determined that a sample of bread had been miraculously transformed into human tissue. One of the cardiac doctors said, “This is tissue from the heart, it is not epidermis, that is, it is not a layer of human skin like an arm or a leg.” The sample is inflamed heart tissue of the myocardium. The cells are inflamed by physical stress. Could this physical stress have been caused when the Body of Jesus was hanging and crucified?

Examination of the Consecrated wine found human DNA in the samples: it is human blood that has a human genetic code – AB Positive. What we see, what we say and what we believe is true: It IS Jesus Christ present in the outer signs of bread and wine, but inwardly transformed into His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity!

Our nation-wide Eucharistic Revival is in its second of three years, leading up to a Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis July 17-21, 2024. 80,000 Catholics will convene for this historic event.

In this second year of the Revival, all parishes in the USA, which includes us at St. Martin de Porres Parish, will share in the preparation for the Congress.

This Wednesday, September 20th, from 1 to 3 PM for seven weeks, we will sponsor a “Eucharistic Study” in our parish center hall. The topics will include: What’s Our Story? Who is Jesus? Am I Saved? Why a Church? God With Us, The Story of the Eucharist, and Bread for the Journey. Sound appealing? Want to keep learning about your Catholic Faith? Come join us for one or for all sessions!

When you come up to receive Holy Communion today, remember that although it still looks like, tastes like and feels like a wafer, it is indeed the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The theme for this year’s Catechetical Sunday is, “Come to Me, All who are Weary and Burdened.” That would be all of us!

Listen to these words directed to you and me:

Jesus knows what you are going through.

Your days may be dark and nights may be stormy,

But Jesus knows and says to you, “Come to Me.”

He will not allow you to be tempted or disappointed beyond what you are able to bear. Then, come to Jesus!

His strength will preserve you.

His presence will bless you. His love will make you glad!

O Sacrament Most Holy, O Sacrament Divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine! (3x) AMEN!