

Dan's homily for Sunday, June 21, 2020

"What are you afraid of?"

What are you afraid of? Is it the dark, horror films, spiders, or heights. Today, many of us are fearful of catching the Coronavirus, financial or business well-being because of the shut-down, or perhaps the violence and protests against racism in our communities.

One of my worst fears is snakes; which began as a child after being startled by a snake. Even today, an encounter with a rattlesnake around our house will keep me awake at night and cause me to jerk my leg up when I think about it slithering about.

Fear is one of the strongest emotions and is the one emotion that prevents us from doing something, from moving forward.

Today's readings present fear in the life of Jeremiah, the prophet who is facing threats of violence from all sides; and the fear the disciples will certainly experience in proclaiming the news of Jesus Christ to the world.

First, Jeremiah, you may remember, was called by God to be His oracle to Israel at a very young age. But, even then, God told him not to be afraid. The Book of Jeremiah begins this way:

The word of the LORD came to me: "... 'Ah, Lord GOD!' I said, 'I do not know how to speak. I am too young!' But the LORD answered me, Do not say, 'I am too young.' To whomever I send you, you shall go; whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you—oracle of the LORD. "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you".

This has been the promise of God to His people, to us, since the beginning: Don't be afraid, I'm right alongside you. In fact He doesn't just want us to not

be afraid, He wants us to be bold in our telling others about who Jesus is, why He came to take on a human body and live a human life, to live with us so we could know Him better, and what He did for us in redeeming us from sin in us and in the world, through the Cross, and overcoming death in His Resurrection. And, especially, how Jesus' teachings, how all of this is relevant, has meaning in people's lives, in my children's and grandchildren's lives today...how it brings meaning to today's problems and life challenges; to our lives.

In the short Gospel we just heard, Jesus speaks of fear four times. He speaks of two areas of fear in our lives: fear of things of the world, of people in the world, and fear of God. Within the context of proclaiming the Gospel, of living a Christian way of life, He cautions His followers not to fear people or the world because while they can cause us harm, they don't have power to harm our soul.

Did you know that in the last 100 years there were more Christian martyrs, Christian persecutions, than in the 19 prior centuries combined. And, while we live in a Country with religious freedoms, the ability to practice our Catholic Faith continues to shrink and be threatened.

The second fear Jesus speaks of is, "be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." This is fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is often misunderstood. It is a Gift of the Holy Spirit; so we ask, how can fear be a gift?

Pope Francis reflected on fear of the Lord:

"This is the fear of God: abandonment into the goodness of Our Father who loves us so. ... This is what the Holy Spirit does in our hearts: He makes us feel like children in the arms of our Daddy ... with the wonder and joy of a child who sees himself served and loved by his Father."

Therefore, this great gift of fear of the Lord allows us to have an intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity. The Father is total love; love for His Son, Jesus, love for us.

Today is Father's Day. Dad's, when we're striving to be our best of selves, give ourselves unselfishly to our wives, children, our family. And, as a teenager, when I was acting at my worst, was very selfish, unloving and taking only for myself. And, I caused my Dad pain and sorrow. What brought me back to the straight and narrow was fear of the Father. Fear that I was separating myself from my good Dad, and causing him such disappointment and sorrow.

Listen to the first part of our Act of Contrition, "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love."

In recognizing the endless love of God for us, we fear any distancing or separation from Him because of our sin. On the one hand God gives us endless graces throughout our life; our skills, food, housing, our intellect and reason, loved ones, our very breath...and the Gift of Fear of the Lord to help us along our path to holiness.

There are no unimportant creatures in God's eyes. We are the ones made in His image and likeness. If He knows the destiny of the little sparrows, how much more will He care for us?

He gives us Himself, His accompaniment, fortitude, to overcome the fears that come from worldly threats. He is alongside us and invites us on our mission to speak of Him in the light and proclaim Him from the rooftops. He invites us to acknowledge Him before others.

And, acknowledging Him is more than just saying I'm a Christian. It is being that example, that person, on the ballfield, in the grocery store, on the roadway, or in the workplace who people see and hear and wonder why you are so loving, so kind, so forgiving. It is being that person who stands up for the vulnerable, speaks up for homeless, loves the unlovable and comforts the downhearted.

Fears are part of our make-up. But, we need only turn to God to overcome our fears, be courageous, and be the witnesses for Jesus Christ in our lives for others.

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Lectionary: 94