

Homily

June 25, 2023

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

22:30 – 33:44

Do you remember when you learned how to ride a bicycle? The first time your mother, or father, or older sibling placed you on that seat and said, “Well, go on...”? And you were afraid, maybe? You’d seen bicycle accidents. You’d seen scraped knees. (Raising his hand...)

How many here were afraid the first time you got on a bicycle? You relied on that person who was standing next to you. Or you relied on the training wheels, if you were that lucky, that they had strapped to the back wheels. But eventually, even those came off. You had to pedal to succeed. And pedal to get beyond your fear. But not without help.

Or, when you learned how to swim: did Dad or Mom just throw you in the pool and say, “Swim, kid.” They did?! Well, that’s terrible. It’s terrifying. Usually someone’s there with you, helping you learn how to do it, bit by bit. But they don’t let go until they think you are ready. You have a companion.

What about the first time you had to speak in public. Were you afraid? I was terrified. I got an ‘F’ on a project just because I would not stand up in front of my class to speak. And now look what happened. I guess I outgrew it.

We all have examples of being afraid in the first times that we do something. But we get through the fear because someone stands with us, encourages us, nurtures us, shows us the way, holds our hand and eventually pushes us off gently.

And though we might still have certain anxieties, we are able to keep pedaling or swimming or speaking.

In our Gospel today, Jesus is sending out the Twelve on their first mission. He’s given them a lot of advice prior to our reading. But he knows they are afraid. Three times in this short passage that we just heard he says, “Be not afraid of them,” or “Be not afraid.”

And what’s fascinating is that right after this passage comes the, “Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. And you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

He shows them that he's going to be their companion even as they go forth away from him. He's given them the basics. And he knows they're afraid. But he says, don't let it conquer you. Let the message carry you and know that I am with you.

Our Prophet Jeremiah today is the most put-upon prophet of all the Old Testament. This poor guy steps into it because God urges him in Chapter 1. "The word of the Lord came to me and it is written: *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I dedicated you. A prophet to the nations I appointed you.*"

"Oh 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," says the Lord.

For the next 19 chapters, Jeremiah works through his fear and continues to proclaim the Word of God, to the point where he has to tell them in Chapter 18 and 19 that Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. The Temple will be destroyed and you leaders and others will be carried off to Babylon.

And the persecution of him that had been going on for the first 19 chapters continues. For Pashhur, the police officer heading up the Temple Police, arrests him because of what he'd said, scourges him and puts him in stocks. You know (sticking his arms and head forward, as in the stocks) those things. And he stays there a whole day and then is released.

Then two more events happen, even before we get to our passage today where he is told once again, "Be not afraid." Yes. He is released, but his life now is full of tension and struggle. And yes, fear.

After he is scourged, Jeremiah has a powerful lament. "You duped me, oh Lord. And I let you dupe me." Actually, the word is "seduced." You got me into this and look what it's gotten me: fear and pain and struggle. I am an outcast. And so now Lord, I am telling you now – I am done. I'm going to speak no more. I am finished. I don't want to live like this.

And then he opines: But there's fire burning in my heart and I cannot stop it. I must speak.

Then our reading occurs, where Jeremiah – yes he complains. He says he is put-upon. He laments the tension. He speaks of his struggle to God. He acknowledges his fear and then he proclaims his ultimate trust in God's saving mercy.

Ah! The Lord! The Companion. He pushed him into this, gently. Ah. *Do not say you're too young. And do not be afraid of those whom you will speak to. Rather – Go! Go beyond your fear.*

None of us here are prophets, I don't think. We might like to turn a profit, but none of us are a prophet. None of us here are apostles. We are not missionaries. But we are baptized Christians. It doesn't matter whether we're prophet, apostle, or part of the baptized priesthood. We have fear, don't we? We have fear of the demands of the Gospel. We have fear of how to live it. We have fear of how to speak it.

There's nothing wrong in being afraid. It's one thing to feel fear. It's another thing to voice one's fear. But it is all together most important to allow trust in God to lessen the effects of the fear and move forward. It is ours to build up that trust in God, knowing that He is with us to encourage us, to show us the way through. And He will help us endure the feared first time, second, or third time experience where we're just not sure we can do it.

Be not afraid. Pope Saint John Paul II --- that was a mantra of his. He would open his many travels with, "Be not afraid." But what he meant by that was: Don't let it conquer you. You are not alone. You are not alone. The Lord walks with you. Your companions in faith walk with you.

You know, my brothers and sisters, I cannot name for you what you are most afraid of about being a Catholic Christian. I wouldn't try. But are you willing to let the Lord walk with you? Are you willing to take that step beyond or through the fear? And to be the strongest that you are possibly able to be in the Faith? Don't be afraid of the "other - them." Don't be afraid that you might fail. You might, but there's another opportunity.

Only be afraid of not doing that which you were called to be.