

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD  
IN THE  
CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY  
JUNE 25, 2023  
12<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**SCRIPTURES:**

<b>Jeremiah 20:7, 10-13</b>	He suffered for his faithfulness to the message.
<b>Romans 5:12-15</b>	The gift of God far surpasses the offense of people.
<b>Matthew 10:26-33</b>	Our fears are baseless because God loves us.

**SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:**

**Matthew:**

Jesus uses a rhetorical device quite well-known to his listeners: *qal wahomer*. “If God takes such meticulous care of a creature that is almost worthless (the sparrow, the hair on our heads), he will certainly take utter concern for you who are so very valuable to him.” Therefore, what have we to fear?

Matthew’s community surely had a lot to fear: internal dissensions and bitter conflicts, persecution from Jews and from Roman authorities. Martyrdom was a daily experience for this early Church. Matthew knows that they need to hear reassuring words from the tradition that carries the words and deeds of Jesus for each generation. In the face of the bitterest sufferings, they are given this consolation that God loves them so very much; that God will protect them with his mighty arm; that their souls are not in peril, even if their bodies are being slain.

Two *sparrows* cost “next to nothing.” That was a coin, an *assarius*, itself worth one-sixteenth of a *denarius*. The denarius was the equivalent of one day’s wage for a common laborer. If one worked only a half hour (one-sixteenth of the day), he was paid “next to nothing,” an assarius. Two sparrows were worth even less than the assarius: if you paid two assarii, you were given five sparrows!

If the Father is concerned over even one sparrow who falls to the ground, this animal of so little value, surely the Father will care for you whom he loves so profoundly. Why do you fear, then?

The one and only fear that disciples are entitled to is fear of sin. No real harm can come to anyone except through sin. Sin will incur the wrath of God; nothing else will. If we do not sin, we are safe, since God himself punishes sin with eternal damnation. Again, Matthew uses the *qal wahomer* device: everyone knows that disciples of Christ do not sin! So, what is there to fear?

The concluding verses use the familiar scene of a courtroom where people are charged with misdeeds, where evidence for or against them is heard, where a judgment is handed down. Jesus himself will be our witness there if we have been faithful to him. What a consolation that is for the ones who have been faithful! How terrible it would be for those who have betrayed Christ and have risked that he will now stand before God to charge them with that unspeakable crime!

This is indeed a heavy-duty Gospel we hear proclaimed among us. Consolations can be found in it. But we also hear dire warnings concerning the fate of those who do not repent. Where can we turn but to the God of strength and of compassion who will have mercy on us?

## **Jeremiah:**

This prophet not only lived to see the consequences of his nation's refusal to heed his warnings but was himself the object of the nation's wrath for having uttered the warnings in the first place. He lived right after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and during the time that the Southern Kingdom was itself overrun by its enemies, and its institutions destroyed beyond recognition. Jeremiah did not just shout and scream because he enjoyed the sound of his own voice. It would have been far more comfortable for him if he had simply kept quiet about the sins of his people. But how can a prophet be silent when God's commands are being violated and people are blindly stuck on a course that will lead them and everyone else to ruin?

## **Romans:**

Paul believes that death came into the world because of the sin of Adam. Death, the greatest enemy that faces every person on the face of the earth, would not have existed had it not been for sin. By his death and resurrection, Christ has restored life to the lives of those who believe in him. Through one, death comes into the world; through the other, life everlasting. A neat and concise little explanation. Our problem today is that we do not have a strong sense of tribal or corporate responsibility for evil done by one person; nor do we appreciate the tribal or corporate consequence of a good act done on our behalf by Christ. Sin, for us, has become only a personal, individual act, for which I alone should be held responsible. In a world where people are more interdependent than we are, it makes a lot of sense that both sin and redemption have consequences far beyond the immediate circle of the sinner or of the redeemer.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Are you able to talk about your fears to anyone at all? Who would you trust to tell what most frightens you in this life? Why do men find it most difficult to talk about what they fear? Do you have any fear of God? Why?
2. Can you talk about your fears to Jesus in prayer? Do you sometimes have to admit that you need his intercession and his intervention? What kinds of things move you so deeply that you turn to God with for relief?
3. To what degree have you grown from an immature fear of God to the kind of respect that is motivated by love? Can you remember a time when you were actually afraid to approach God with a problem, with your guilt over having done wrong? How has that changed over time? And why?

## **SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION**

Once in a while, during the week, pause to take a look at your motives for doing good. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten you in finding the root of your motives in serving God and in fulfilling your duties in life.

## PRAYING TOGETHER

**Please hurry, Lord, and answer my prayer.**

**I feel hopeless.**

**Don't turn away and leave me here to die.**

**Each morning, let me learn more about your love  
because I trust you.**

**I come to you in prayer,  
asking for guidance.**

*(From Psalm 143, vv. 7-8, Contemporary English)*

## CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke to the American people, in the famous Fireside Chats, to try to reassure them in the depths of the Great Depression. He said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Jesus spoke of another fear, far more important than "fear itself" -- fear of losing our immortal souls in the death of unrepented sin.

Fear can paralyze all of our efforts. We can be frozen in fear. Or, we can be motivated by fear to avoid and to flee that which threatens us. We can be motivated to stand up to the enemy, to confront our fears, face to face, and to overcome them.

In the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous we hear: "Fear and faith cannot coexist." "We need to replace fear with faith."

Fear of God does not sound right in our ears today. Not that we think that God has no right and no power to punish us for our sins, but rather, we stress the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. The mercy and compassion of God for all creation holds priority over punishment. If we repent sincerely and are determined to change our way of living, God always forgives. God does not punish those who are sorry for their sins. Yet, some element of fear persists in our hearts when we realize the majesty and the power of God. That is a healthy kind of fear.

Perhaps, fear of God really means a profound respect for God who is our Creator and our Father. "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Knowing who God is and who we are leads us to a profound respect for God's rights and for our duties toward God.

One time alone in the Second Testament (Acts 5:1-11), we are given what has been called a "Rule-Miracles of Punishment" story. "A great fear seized the whole church" when they witnessed the sudden death of Ananias and his wife who had withheld part of the proceeds that had been promised to the community when they sold their property. They had lied to God and to the Church. So, they died, then and there! These kinds of stories had been quite common in the First Testament.

There has to be a healthy place in our Christian spirituality for those kinds of feelings which motivate us to respect the rights of God and to do our duty toward God. It is appropriate to call those feelings *fear of the Lord*. Even as adults, who have passed from childish fears of the dark and fears of monsters in the night, we *fear* infection from deadly viruses, we *fear* toxic substances in the food chain; we *fear* the destruction of the environment; we *fear* unsound teachings in the Church and in the public schools. Unless those fears become neurotic or psychic, they are healthy fears. They protect us from harm.