

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 14, 2022

No pain, no gain is a time-tested mantra of the exercise world. It's become a kind of cliché, but the idea it represents still seems to hold. Of course, we know what that phrase means when it comes to working out.

It means that if our exercise routine seems too easy, if we never push beyond what is comfortable, if our workouts don't feel like what they are called - work - we probably aren't doing them right, and probably won't see the results we want. Put it another way, the "goal" we are trying to achieve is essentially impossible if we try to reach it without incurring a "cost". No pain, no gain.

In a certain sense, our readings are a kind of confirmation of that very sentiment. In the First Reading we see Jeremiah experiencing some pretty harsh treatment at the hands of others - simply because he was saying some tough things that the people didn't want to hear (but probably needed to hear).

And it almost cost him his life. Of course, he was saying those really challenging things because God had called him to do just that. And well, this was his "reward". And it most certainly wasn't what Jeremiah expected.

In the Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews the author reminds us of the need to keep persevering in the faith, and reminds us of what Jesus endured - the shame, the opposition, the struggle, the cross. Implicit in this passage is the idea that the followers of Jesus can expect similar things.

And in one of the most difficult Gospel passages to hear, St. Luke tells us how Jesus painted a picture of great strife and conflict and division to his disciples.

"Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth?"

Rough stuff.

And I think at some level we “get it”, we get the basic message of these three readings. We know that people have all sorts of different ideas about these sorts of things, all sorts of different ideas and “answers” regarding the biggest questions of life, all sorts of different ideas about what is good and just and true.

And therefore, anyone who “stands up” for something runs the risk of someone else pushing back against that idea or belief. It’s been that way since the dawn of humanity and will continue into the future.

And we Christians are certainly not exempted from it. Nor people of any faith tradition are, nor are non-believers. We even sometimes experience it from our non-Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ. And we know from history and experience that we aren’t always the ones being persecuted. Sometimes we have been (and are) the persecutors. These things mean a lot to people. And because of that passion, we sometimes lash out at one another. I’m sure none of what I’m saying is news to you.

And so sometimes we have to face ridicule for what we believe. Sometimes we have to face anger (or maybe even violence - especially in some parts of the world). Sometimes we have to face the disappointment of our children or our friends or our coworkers who might not only not understand why we believe what we believe, but who might sincerely find what we believe to be distasteful, or harmful, or misguided, or seemingly lacking compassion. Yes, the journey of faith is not all bluebirds and rainbows. It’s also littered with difficulty and challenges and sorrow not to mention crosses. It was that way in the time of Jesus, and in many respects, it’s that same way today.

Many of us accept this fact, but still find it painful, find it to be a great disappointment, find it to be something we wish we could avoid. That seems to make perfect sense. But others among us seem to almost take a

kind of satisfaction in the criticism of others, see the anger of others toward them as “evidence” that they are obviously doing something right, that they are on the faithful path, that God must be pleased with how they are “sticking up” for what they believe. And there might be truth in that.

But there might not be.

You see, just BECAUSE we experience push back from others, just BECAUSE some people are angry with what we believe or what we are saying or what we are “standing up” for, isn’t actually PROOF of our faithfulness. It might just be that we’re going about things in the wrong way, or presenting our faith in an unkind or uncaring way. Or it might be that we are interacting with others in a way that suggests we think we are the “good” people, the ones God is pleased with. Or it might be that we are standing up for our beliefs in a way that comes across as more of trying to win an intellectual argument rather than of trying to love another person.

Any of these things could actually be, or might be, a kind of betrayal of our faith, not a heroic defense of it. So let’s be careful not to adopt a kind of “siege” mentality - one in which we hide out in the castle with the drawbridge up, protecting ourselves from the big bad world out there.

Rather, let’s continue to witness to our faith in word and deed, always mindful that if we’re not doing it out of love then we can be assured that we’re doing it for the wrong reason.