

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10; Psalm 40;
Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

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When I first came to St. Perpetua's some time ago, I had already been studying to be a priest for five years, but the first few would have left some people wondering if I would ever get to the end. Specifically, during my first summer as a seminarian, I would visit patients at the City of Hope, which is a hospital in Southern California that focuses on treating cancer patients. The treatment that cancer patients undergo—whether radiation, chemotherapy, or a combination of the two—is intense to say the least; for example, one of the many, many side-effects of chemotherapy in particular is that most patients lose their hair. And because the hospital was within the parish boundary, I would go there once, even twice every week.



One day on my patient roster was a name spelled M-a-r-i-b-e-l. Now after just having a year-long course in the Old Testament, I knew that “-el” was a Semitic suffix, like “Gabri-el” or “Micha-el” or “Rapha-el.” And I said to myself, “Look at me—with my great theological education, I am smart enough to know that this name should be pronounced ‘Mari-be-el.’” I also confirmed it by looking at the last name, “A-l-a-n” or “Al-an,” which also seemed plausibly Semitic too. Plus, I

figured that it was a man's name, because as I looked through the window—all of the rooms had large windows for family to look through when they could not enter the room for some reason—I saw the back of a bald head, wrinkled as it lay on a pillow facing away towards a nurse. However, there was a middle-aged fellow outside, so I walked up to introduce myself. “Hello, I'm Ryan, one of the Catholic care ministers here at the hospital. Is Mari-be-el your father?” The man looked straight at me and said, “No, that's Maribel, Maribel Alan, and she's my wife.”

It was like one of those Southwest Airlines commercials—“*Wanna get away?*” The answer was, “*Please, God, right now.*” My cheeks must have been the color of a tomato, because I could feel the heat coming off them as I blushed. Now this is far from the first or last time that I really put my foot in my mouth, but most of the others I can't retell in church. And the truth is that we've all had the experience of getting ourselves into trouble by saying the wrong thing—but what about getting into trouble for saying the right thing?

This is Jeremiah's experience, described in the first reading. He tells the people of Judah and Jerusalem what is going to happen if they keep to their ways. He tells them that they are going to be conquered if they do not change. It's not surprising then that the political leaders, the “princes” and the “soldiers” (38:4), would find such a message most disconcerting; and so, they are the ones that throw him into a cistern (38:6). He just tells it like it is—really, tells it like God tells him to—

and this is his reward—getting tossed into a dank well with no food or water.



The truth is sometimes terribly inconvenient, and our Lord who is Truth itself reminds us of the same thing in the Gospel. He speaks how he and his message will be received and describes it as “fire,” “anguish” and a cause of “division” (cf. 12:49-52). His language is clear, extended, and emphatic: “a father will be divided against his son, and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (12:53). He could have simplified the point, but it would not have had the same effect, and it would not have been as clear how well our Lord understood human nature.

Regularly, I like to open the paper and read the “Dear Abby” section. It helps me get a sense of the dilemmas and problems that people encounter, and I use them as case studies for pastoral counseling. The vast majority of the letters involve problems with a family member. But what is more, in most of the letters the people already know what the solution or a reasonable solution would be; it’s not that they do not know what to do, but that what they

have to do is difficult and, on a certain level, they just don’t want to do it.

A sizeable percentage too of the cases involve addictions—alcohol, drugs, and others. Usually, these letters are from one family member who is directly or indirectly feeding the other’s addiction, and they ask what they should do to stop it and invariably Abby says the same thing: “stop”—stop giving them money, stop offering them a place to crash, stop enabling the problematic behavior to continue because otherwise it will. A person in this situation has to allow the addict’s choices to have consequences, because it’s only when the addict faces those consequences and chooses something different that their behavior will change. But it is very difficult—for the addict and perhaps even more for the family member that loves them.



It is in this way, though, that the right thing can divide families, just as our Lord says—father against son, son against father, mother against daughter. It is one of those hard facts of life that sometimes you got to do what you got to do, and some people aren’t going to like it. But the guiding principle of our life must be the good, not necessarily the easy or the most pleasurable or what will keep the status quo going

because we are afraid of what might have to change. The right thing can be hard to do.

It is in precisely those moments that our faith gives us the perspective to understand and the strength to do what needs to be done. As was said in the Letter to the Hebrews, *“Let us rid ourselves of every burden that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of [what] lay before him he endured the cross... Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart”* (Hebrews 12:1-4).



As dark our well may be, Christ our Lord lights the way, wanting “to set the world on fire” and to make it “blazing” bright (Luke 12:49). He wants to come to our aid in our darkest hour (cf. Psalm 40). He wants things to be better because he wants us to be our very best.