Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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When I was 4, I told my mother that I was running away and would never come back. She replied that any child of hers who ran away and never came back would receive a punishment she/he would never forget. Well, that was enough for me! (Logic was not my strong suit then.) At the same time, her dealings with us made it obvious that no child of hers could quash her motherly love — no matter what we did.

Today, Jeremiah gives us an image of a motherly God who wants nothing to do with punishment. When the people break their covenant with the God who freed them, what does God do? God turns to them to offer a better deal than they had known before.

God had brought them out of Egypt; when they were unfaithful, God said, "I will make a new covenant with you. This covenant will join us heart to heart. It will affect you so deeply that our mutual love will teach the world all they need to know about me."

Ours is a God who gambles on love — over and over again.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 17, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51
Hebrews 5:7-9
John 12:20-33

In today's Gospel, Jesus explains the same dynamic in relation to his life and mission. As he did in predicting his passion (see Mark 8:31-38 and its eight parallels), Jesus revealed that, as God's representative, he would prove the boundless power of love through vulnerability, becoming like a seed that falls to the ground and dies in order to produce fruit.

The most Godly thing about Jesus' vulnerability was that, unlike our own weakness and limitations, it was freely chosen (John 10:18). The most amazing thing about it was that it revealed the true character of God as a divine lover who constantly tries

to woo us beyond our broken covenants and our attempts to fashion the divine in our own image.

Today, we hear from the Letter to the Hebrews, a work that seems to have been a long sermon (a synagogue "message of encouragement") slightly revised to function like a letter. Who wrote this letter is a mystery, but some scholars suggest that it was Priscilla, the woman who, along with her husband Aquila, collaborated with Paul and continued his ministry. In that case, it may be the only New Testament work (and recorded synagogue sermon) written by a woman.

The Letter to the Hebrews aims to strengthen a community under persecution and in danger of denying their faith. Today's selection emphasizes Christ's complete solidarity with us in all things and it highlights his example for those undergoing temptation. The author carefully explains that Christ himself suffered and cried out to "the one who was able to save him from death."

She goes on to say, "He was heard. ... Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered." We might note that although he cried out to the one who could save him, evil forces ultimately succeeded in killing him.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus himself went through a process of growth in union with God; he had to learn to trust beyond reasonable hope in order to experience what God could do in and for him. His faithfulness to God's call, his reliance on love over all else, opened him to the unimaginable future of resurrected/eternal life. In that, he revealed God's glory, the power of God to bring life out of death.

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From Jesus, we learn that divine power is the most subversive force in all of creation. Rather than crush opponents, God's power undermines evil and the violence it perpetrates. As Mahatma Gandhi explained, "Love is the strongest force the world possesses, yet it is the humblest imaginable."

Ultimately, the greatest leap of faith Christians are invited to take is to believe in this entirely counterintuitive and countercultural idea that the forces of humility, generous love, and tender, nonviolent creativity are the instruments of world change. This is Jesus' message. He taught that falling into the ground and dying lead to ousting the ruler of this world.

Christ's ongoing offer is to draw everything to himself. To believe that is to have faith that when the forces of evil unleash their worst, they ultimately expose themselves impotent against love.

As we draw near Holy Week, our liturgy invites us to reassess the creed we really live by.

Do we look to Christ to be delivered from punishment or harm? If so, what does the cross tell us about that? Are we willing to gamble everything on the power of love? To the extent that we choose the latter, we are on our way to being drawn into the very heart of a motherly God.