



Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time August 31, 2014 A

GODLY SEDUCTION

The following reflection on today's readings are by Patricia Sanchez.

Have you ever been seduced? Given the fact that the term seduce is defined as "the act of enticing, beguiling or winning another over to a desired state or position" (The American Heritage Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston MA: 1982), it seems safe to assume that every one of us has been seduced at one time or another in our lives.

Some of us are seduced by love and others of us yield to hatred. Some are seduced by ideas and/or what are perceived or presented as ideals. In the 1930s and 40s, Hitler seduced thousands with the notion that blue-eyed, fair-haired Aryans were the superior race and that other "lesser" individuals should be exterminated. Over 6,000,000 died as a result of that seduction. In 1978, almost 900 people died in Guyana, having been seduced by Jim Jones into accepting him as their leader. Some of the group committed fraud for him, others murder; in the end all committed suicide by his order. Other such cult figures had exercised similar powers of seduction over their followers, e.g., David Koresh, Branch Davidians, Marshall Applewhite, Heaven's Gate, Shoko Asahara, Aum Shinrikyo.

Some among us are seduced by power; others by luxury, leisure and prestige. Some of us allow ourselves to be seduced by trends in fashion and go to great lengths and great expense to wear whatever style or brand names has cornered the market for its fleeting fifteen minutes of fame.

Aware of the human penchant for seduction, advertising moguls use every possible means to seduce consumers; researchers determine which colors, shapes and designs are more appealing and test-market their products to ensure the greatest monetary success from their commercial seduction. Politicians' ads seduce with busy words, catch-phrases and platforms, built on appealing promises.

Obviously, seductions vary; some are good and beneficial, whereas others are evil and harmful. Both extremes are exemplified in today's Scripture readings. In his Roman correspondence (second reading) Paul is exhorting his readers not to be seduced by the world

("Do not conform ourselves to this age") but to surrender to the seduction of the God whose mercy will transform and renew them. In the gospel, Peter succumbs to seduction and is denounced by Jesus as a Satan, a tempter. Although, he had just declared Jesus as Messiah and Son of God (see last week's gospel), Peter's messianic expectations were not consonant with God's saving plan. He was seduced by the popular anticipation of a royal messiah, who, with military might, would rout the enemies of Israel and Judah and firmly establish a reign wherein his people would enjoy prestige, prosperity and power over all the nations of the earth. Suffering and death were far from Peter's mind because he had not yet made his own the mind of Christ. For this reason, Peter was harshly reprimanded by Jesus.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, was seduced (in Jeremiah 20:7, "duped" is more accurately rendered as "seduced") by God and by the Word of truth and judgment that he was sent to speak to his contemporaries. That he tried to resist the divine seduction is clearly evident in today's first reading. Seduced by God, Jeremiah was, nevertheless, also strengthened by God for the inevitable resistance he would encounter during his ministry. Because he has shared his struggle with us so frankly, Jeremiah can be revered as a model for disciples of both covenants.

As we reflect on Jeremiah's experience of the divine seduction and his subsequent love affair with God, we are also reminded that the Sacred Seducer of Sinners is still at work, enticing and beguiling each of us in an effort to win us away from sin and self and draw us toward life and goodness. There is no place to hide, to flee or to escape from the love which calls us to wholeness and holiness, all the while reverencing our freedom to resist and reject such a gift.

FIRST READING: JEREMIAH 20:7-9

Today's first reading is an excerpt from that part of the prophet's writings now known as his "confessions." Later inserted into the Jeremiah's oracles, visions and discourses by a redactor or by the prophet himself, these confessions (see also 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18) are a personal testimony to the cost of Jeremiah's discipleship and dedication to the word of

God. More than any other biblical writer (except, perhaps, for Paul), Jeremiah bares his pain in unabashed and almost brutal candor. An audacious ambassador of God's word, he was also audacious in his complaint about the difficulty of his mission.

More important than his complaining, however, is the insight Jeremiah shares concerning the phenomenon of prophetic inspiration. He likened his mandate to a fire burning in his heart that he could not contain or control (v.9). In spite of his desire to be relieved of such a daunting responsibility ("I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak his name no more."), Jeremiah could not suppress or silence the word that demanded a hearing. Compelled by the power of that word, Jeremiah could not and would not be silent despite every effort (dungeon, stocks, flogging, derision, and even the threat of death) on the part of his contemporaries to do so.

Whether they wished to hear him or not, Jeremiah denounced the corruption of the temple liturgy, decried the dabbling into foreign cults, chastised the many breaches of fidelity to the covenant, castigated those who ignored the needs of the poor and predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. He was, as Walter Brueggemann has noted, "God's man." In that capacity, Jeremiah championed the truth because he was utterly convinced that: (1) truth is not our autonomous judgment but is only from God; (2) truth is not private, apart from public events; (3) truth does not go undisputed in a world of lies and deception.

Jeremiah's seduction by God's love and his subsequent unrelenting dedication to the truth of God's word have set the foundation for our understanding of Jesus. Like Jeremiah who suffered all rather than betray God's love, Jesus willingly suffered and died so that sinners would continue to know and experience that love in the new and everlasting covenant that Jeremiah had foretold (31:31-34).

Given the intensity with which both men lived their lives, contemporary believers may have cause to wonder: Would a Jeremiah or a Jesus find acceptance in today's world? Would they gain a hearing, or would their boldness and tenacity be dismissed as "fanatical" or "on the fringe"? Would they be censured because of their seemingly blasphemous approach to and unconventional intimacy with God? On the other hand, given the personal risks and challenges involved in such a ministry, are there any among us willing to embrace it as did Jeremiah and Jesus? If we are unwilling to take on the challenge ourselves, then let us, at the very least, lend an open ear and heart to those with the courage to do so.

SECOND READING: ROMANS 12:1-2

Paul writes: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Surprising as it may seem, relatively little is known for certain about the origins of the church in Rome. Paul did not found the community there; indeed, at the time he wrote his letter to them (ca. 56-57 C.E. from Corinth), he had not even visited the Christians of Rome; what we do know is that the Roman church emerged within the context of Rome's sizeable Jewish community. Someone, who remains unnamed to the present day, preached the good news of salvation in the empire's capital city and by the early 40s C.E. a viable Jewish Christian community had been established. Gradually, the complexion of the church became more universal as gentile believers were welcomed into the fold....

In our second reading, Paul begins with a basic consideration: Christians would live in this world as if their Christian mode of life were offering worship to God. Unlike Judaism or the various cults of Rome which offered animal sacrifices, Christians are called to present themselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

In order to become a living liturgy, as it were, believers must necessarily resist conformity to all that is not Christ in order to be transformed and renewed by Christ. Not a purely personal feat, this resistance and transformative renewal are prompted and sustained by grace. Nor is the transformation and renewal of the believer a merely external or cosmetic change. On the contrary, Paul calls his readers to a renewal of their nouns, or mind, such that their conversion is an interior movement toward Christ that will express itself in all they are, do, say, think, decide and choose.

As Paul's exhortation is repeated in our hearing today, we, too, are reminded that we who belong to God and to Christ and who live by the power of the transforming Spirit are to be seduced by none other. Seduced and supported by grace, we are thereby consecrated and called to live holy and wholesome lives before the Lord and all others.

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GOSPEL: MATTHEW 16:21-27

Reflecting on this Sunday's Gospel, Fr. Eugene Lauer writes:

Jesus has been trying to reach the apostles for a couple of years. When Jesus intimates that he will have to suffer in order to win his goal and triumph in his mission, Peter immediately suggests that Jesus should avoid this trial and pain. He suggests that he and the other apostles will do their best to help Jesus get out of any suffering and discomfort.

He missed the point completely. Great triumph comes through sweat and tears. Trial and difficulty raise us to the heights. Death brings resurrection.

We must be careful in our practical adjustment to this teaching, not to fall into the trap of thinking that the truth of this teaching lies in an unusual extreme. One could seek every possible suffering, trial, pain, difficulty, discomfort and think of oneself as very holy. There is no indication that Jesus meant anything like this.

The truth of the matter is that trial and suffering are inevitable, that they will be a part of every mature human life without exception. We need not seek suffering. It will come, Jesus teaches us to accept this as a fact, to deal with our trials directly when they come upon us.

And here is the glory of this teaching. He tells us that every trial has a triumph in it. He reveals to us from the wisdom of the eternal God that within suffering there is hope. There is, for the Christian, no such thing as pain without resurrection.

Peter was seeking to avoid suffering. Some fanatic extremists seek to self-inflict suffering. Neither is in touch with the divine message.

We must be ready to suffer when trials come. It does no good to turn our faces away. But, we must be ready to rise again, too.

Have a blessed week,

