

Reflection for 24-25 June 2017
Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A
Mike Britton

Text: Jeremiah 20:10-13, Romans 5:12-15, Matthew 10:26-33.

Jesus tells us that not a sparrow falls without God's knowledge and care, and that we are worth more than many sparrows; yet he also tells us to fear the one who can destroy both body and soul, and warns us that whoever denies him, he will deny before God. This whole chapter of Matthew is filled with this alternation of warning and reassurance; it gives us a glimpse of the mystery and awesomeness of God, whose love for us is boundless, but whose face we cannot see and live.

Remember: Jesus was talking to those who knew him best, the Twelve Apostles, when he was sending them out to minister to the Israelites in his name. His words were to be understood in the context of their relationship. We too have to understand this through our baptismal relationship with God in the Holy Spirit. Jesus is reminding his closest followers, and hopefully us, of lived experience of God's power, God's love, God's forgiveness.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus warns his disciples that like Jeremiah, they will be rejected and persecuted, but here he tells them and us to speak boldly the truth that is in them, to hide nothing. That sounds easy to many of us, perhaps: our society still largely respects the profession of Christian faith, although some of its implications can be socially uncomfortable. For example, if we call into question the capitalist values of wealth, the virtue of increasing consumption leading to economic growth, the rationality of paying only for what benefits oneself, or the externalization of costs, which leads to the exploitation and destruction of every good thing we hold in common, we may find ourselves a little less popular in some circles. Even so, we are unlikely to be kicked out of town, thrown to the lions, or even subjected to a remarkable number of "random" security checks at airports for declaring our faith.

The truth God has placed in us isn't just a matter of religious principles and beliefs, though. Our identity, our being, is God's gift to us, and letting that

be seen is always risky. We judge each other by our own standards, and reject each other so easily. One is too poor, another too gay, a third, too pious; this one too fat, that one too promiscuous... there's no end to the list. In even a small city like ours, it is an incredible amount of work to open ourselves even a little bit to each of the hundreds of people we pass every day, and risk rejection by being seen as something more than anonymous pedestrian number 348. And yet, Jesus invites us to be present to each other, to love one another as he loved us, to notice the individual and love them, and allow them to love us. Do not be afraid of the world's rejection, he tells us, because he is with us and will bring us to God.

But what of God's fearsome judgment? It's pretty hard to be open and loving with the destruction of body and soul in Hell on my mind. "Be nice, or else!" sounds a lot like "Do as I say, not as I do," so maybe Jesus meant something a little different. My reading of this is that when Jesus says that he will deny one who denies him, he means that God has given us the freedom to reject him, and God will not withdraw it. It's a matter of immense pain to God, who loves every bit of us, whether we have hair on our heads or not, to lose one person; there is great rejoicing in heaven, Jesus tells us, when a single sinner repents. Whenever we turn towards God, however far away we think we have walked with our backs turned, God is right there, and a single step takes us into God's arms. Until we do, we add pain; our own, other people's, and God's; when we return to God, repentance may be hard too, as we address the truths we may have long denied, but it is a healing suffering, and can lead to lasting reconciliation.

Jesus knew that Peter would deny him three times on the very night that Peter swore his unswerving loyalty, and knew the pain of that rejection, yet loved and loves Peter anyway. I pray it is so for each of us: that even when we don't fulfill Jesus' call to live in the light, God remains steadfast and looks forward to our choice to return to God's all-embracing and individual, tender love.