

OK, my nod to Super Bowl Sunday. If you think your husband is a world-class, gold-medal sports freak, Linda Geyer has a bet for you. Any horror story you have, she can top. So your husband can't bear to watch anything but the sports channels? Linda's husband Mitch has 4 TV sets placed throughout their suburban California home, a 5th in the garage, a 6th on the patio and a portable TV in the car.

Did your husband watch sports on your honeymoon? At the wedding, their minister talked about Mitch's love of sports. At the reception, her new hubby, who owns a sporting-goods store, kept slipping away so he could catch the big game on the radio.

Did your man play golf while you were sick in bed? The day 5 years ago when tests showed Linda, might have a kidney tumor, Mitch picked her up at the hospital, dropped her at home with her mother, his mother and their 3-week-old colicky newborn, and went on to his regular Friday afternoon racetrack date with his buddies.

But even Linda could not top the jaw-dropping news out of Jonesboro, Georgia, during Super Bowl XXIV: When a woman committed suicide that Sunday, her husband waited until the game was over to call the authorities. This is how the coroner's investigator expressed his perplexity at the delay: "I just can't explain it," he said, "That game was SO boring!"

It reminds me of Erma Bombeck's great line: "If a husband watches more than 3 football games a week the wife should have him declared legally dead and have his estate probated."

The first reading from Jeremiah was the one I chose for my ordination to the priesthood. The next several lines, skipped in the text, have Jeremiah protesting "Ah, Lord God, I know not how to speak; I am too young." It captured my sentiments exactly. I finally surrendered to ordination, saying to God "If this is what you want, then Ok. But I'm not sure I'm up to the task."

In his provocative meditations on the prophet Jeremiah, Carlo Cardinal Martini, suggested that the prophet recounted this narrative of his initial call from God much later in life (A PROPHETIC VOICE IN THE CITY). Martini suggests that Jeremiah was living in a moment of great difficulty in which he had realized the failure of his mission. He had spoken God's word for years, but to no avail. No one seemed to listen. No one seemed to change. But he remembered that early, clear call, and drew strength from it in his times of trouble. Jeremiah remembers that despite everything, God is the one who had called him and he had done all he could to obey that call. It's a deeply moving passage. It was not written by a young man full of eager longing -- but by a battle-scarred veteran who had paid the price of daring to preach God's word and try to live in accord with its promptings. He is not called the 'weeping prophet' for nothing. This man had suffered deeply.

But he remembers. He didn't get into this on his own. The initiative was God's. This is shown in the several first-person expressions that describe the action of God: "I formed, I knew, I dedicated, I appointed, I command, I would not leave you crushed, I made you....A fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of brass....I am with you..." Clearly, the prophet was to understand, as were his contemporaries, that his was God's work, his was God's voice, his message was not his own but that of the God who called and commissioned him for service.

That service required Jeremiah to speak out boldly and relentlessly -- for over 50 years! Jeremiah felt compelled by the power of the word, and so he predicted -- and then endured and interpreted -- the downfall of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Rather than attribute their defeat to the superior strength of the

foreign army, Jeremiah assigned all the tragedies they bore to the infidelities of the Israelites themselves. Obviously they did NOT want to hear this.

And as we read through the book, while Jeremiah's contemporaries were dire and without hope, the prophet was not without hope for future generations, to whom he promised a new and everlasting covenant, written in the hearts of a beloved and forgiven people. (Jer 31:31-34). It was in this covenant that subsequent Israelites placed their hopes, and it was Jeremiah's promise of eventual reconciliation with God that enabled the defeated and exiled tribes of Judah to come home to their beloved Jerusalem and start all over again. (this freely adapted from CELEBRATION, Jan 31, 2010, p. 2)

Second, we see then why those who put together the lectionary paired this reading with the gospel passage from Luke. We see here that prophet Jesus has His own struggles. It all started out so well. Jesus was the hometown boy and the people had heard great things about Him. They were thinking that He could do some of those miracles right there in His hometown. The phrase, 'Physician, cure yourself' is in no way a criticism of Jesus. Rather it is a proverb similar to saying 'Look after yourself and your kin first before you attempt to help others.'

The folks at Nazareth assumed that Jesus would do the same wonderful acts for them that He had performed at Capernaum. Yet the sermon takes a bad turn. In verse 24 Jesus says that He is not 'acceptable' in His own hometown, which is an interesting play on words since it's the same word found in last week's gospel in verse 19 about the 'acceptable' year of the Lord. Jesus announces the 'acceptable' year of the Lord, yet He is not 'acceptable' in His own hometown synagogue. Jesus has just announced that the long-awaited messianic age is here, in this 'acceptable' year, and the people's adulation turns to rage when Jesus announces the peculiar nature of the messianic age that is coming.

The people at Nazareth believed that the Messiah would put their Gentile overlords to rout and set Israel up as the grand people God had promised they would be. But Jesus cites 2 examples of prophetic moments when God acted to redeem and to save 'outsiders' – Elijah gave food to a Gentile widow and her son (1 Kings 17:8-16) though the prophet fed no Israelites. And in verse 27, Jesus tells of the time when Elisha healed Naaman, a Syrian army officer, of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14) – but no lepers who were Israelites. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-Mar 10, p. 22)

Third, these 2 passages tell about a bad reaction to Jeremiah and a bad reaction to Jesus. That's not looking so good for me! Jesus preaches for barely 3 minutes and the people want to kill Him. Please don't reach for your gun! Give me a couple more minutes! As I have said before, the task of the preacher is to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. Disturbing the comfortable is thankless work. When Jesus reminds the hometown folks that God blessed foreigners and even those people they consider their enemies, that God's love and mercy is not reserved just for them, they were enraged. The prophetic challenge to their comfortable and insular way of life brought them up short. Rather than look into themselves, they rose up in rage and tried to throw Jesus over a cliff.

It's easy to think of the people of Nazareth as violent and primitive. But part of the truth is that they took Jesus' words more seriously than we often do. If Jesus preached this sermon today, we might not ignore Him, but we might make fun of Him as hopelessly naïve and out of touch with the real world. For you see, things haven't changed much in human affairs in the past 2000 years, which is why these scriptures are so timeless. Do we really want everyone to have a place at the table? Do we really want gay people, pedophiles, terrorists, ex-convicts and illegal immigrants to be part of God's plan and purpose? Part of our communities and neighborhoods and church? Anytime I mention any of these groups in a homily, I get letters, emails and

comments protesting. And the offended immediately appeal to man-made laws and nice legalities and condemnation, quickly forgetting that Jesus came for ALL, and that salvation is intended for ALL. People don't even want to hear about people who are different from us. Let's just pretend everyone is comfortable and doing fine – just like we are in Apex and Holly Springs. Do we want the Good News to be for ALL? Do we want our wealth redistributed, for everyone to have equal opportunities when we have far more than our fair share?

The question the text begs is this: How do we account for such murderous rage on the part of Jesus' once friendly neighbors? Well, Jesus knows who He is —the Beloved One of God. Family therapists use the term 'self-definition' to express a certain posture of over-againstness or self-differentiation from the prevailing system. The system's reaction is most often severe. In fact, family therapists call it an 'acute phase' where the system tries to pressure the person who is defining himself in opposition to the system to return to their 'normal' position. If the offense is significant to the group's cohesiveness or identity, then expulsion is the only option.

Further, by stealing the crowd's criticism that He is not performing miracles in Nazareth as He did in Capernaum, Jesus defines Himself not as a miracle-worker, but as a messiah. But where Jesus really gets Himself in trouble is by aligning Himself with outsiders. In so doing, Jesus has wounded the Nazareth crowd narcissistically, i.e., at the core of their being, at how they represent themselves to themselves, at the level of their self-image.

Their narcissism, their self-elevation and self-inflation as God's chosen people, is punctured by Jesus' skillful use of the stories of Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Zarephath. For the elite there is little value in being God's chosen if you cannot see yourself as specially endowed and favored. The only recourse is psychological annihilation – or even murder. Clearly the story represents a foreshadowing of Jesus' eventual trial and death – at the hands of religious folks -- pulling the levers of power.

So these readings are a cautionary tale for us and how we deal with the world around us. Our culture tends to tolerate our Catholicism as long as we keep it mostly private. As long as we fit in with the culture in terms of consumption of goods and its involvement in leisure activities, we are dismissed as quaint, archaic, and/or irrelevant.

But when we get serious about how the gospel self-defines us as believers, when the prevailing culture deems as too extreme the church's identification with the outsider, the alien and the poor, then the narcissistic wound is too great for the system to tolerate. The church is accused of meddling in politics or business or social norms. We are told that we are preaching politics. The church needs to be put back in its place.

It's ok for the church to support and do random acts of charity, but it is to leave effecting policy change to the professionals: business boards and CEO's, politicians and well-financed lobbyists. That hasn't worked so well, though, has it? And we're not supposed to talk about the immorality of keeping immigrants illegal and unable to find a path to citizenship. But the Catholic Church clearly teaches that there is a universal RIGHT to emigrate. We'll hide behind laws and border walls. We don't want to be accused of greed, inordinate self-concern, privileged deals, or unabashed power-broking. As American Catholics, we are expected to support all wars as sanctioned by the tax-paying, God-fearing citizens of the Promised Land, which is for us the United States of America. The church must weigh any attempt to provide for the public welfare against what this will do to the investment community and our tax cuts, not to mention our ability to buy additional luxuries. Can't we agree that it is NOT right that we have so much and so many have so little? But then what do we DO about

it? We can't just go shopping and forget about it. Our faith tells us we are more than our stuff. We're worth far more than that.

There are many spiritual implications to our inability to welcome the stranger. The early church grew because it welcomed them. The church grew not only numerically, but also in spiritual depth because they recognized no one as stranger and no need or person as beyond human compassion.

The questions we might all pray about this week are: Are we personally – and as a parish --- a hospitable place for the handicapped, the mentally ill, the sexually confused, the unemployed, the stranger, the other? And where we are not – both personally – and as a parish – what are we going to do about it?

Now hasn't this been a fun sermon? Not for me. Not for you. And everything I ever say always applies to me first. I am rich, privileged, white, and comfortable. One of the sermon snippets I read this past week was entitled "Pardon me while I offend you with my sermon." (Will Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-Mar 10, p. 21) I guess if we are all going to be serious – and faithful about our following of Christ – we SHOULD be offended by the Word of God from time to time. If we are never offended, we probably aren't listening. So SORRY! And AMEN! (This final section adapted from Charles E. Brown, in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Dec 09-Jan 10, p. 75)