

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 21st 2016

Both readings today identify relationships with God that are in need of work. Jeremiah and Jesus serve as the “couples' therapists” for Yahweh and his people.

In the first reading Israel is described as being the unfaithful spouse. This is a rather harsh, though perhaps accurate description. If I imagine myself in the role of Jeremiah making this exhortation, I perceive that there is an effort to get the message across in two ways. First, I feel that this message seeks to induce fear. Adultery is often thought of as an unforgivable sin. Leviticus makes it clear that the penalty for adultery is death. This is a warning to the people as to where they may be headed. I think on another level Jeremiah may be seeking to persuade using empathy. It is one thing to be dumped in a relationship. It is far more painful to experience an act of betrayal in an intimate relationship. Although both leave the victim hurt and wondering if they are lovable, the latter also leaves the one paralyzed in terms in of the ability to trust. Israel was the spouse who was infatuated with her new partner. She made commitments and then saw the infatuation fade. A new potential significant other came along and he was much more interesting than the existing faithful partner. I find myself thinking that Jeremiah may be evoking how damaged and hurt the people would feel in the situation of infidelity. It is curious that I am drawn to consider our God in anguish. I rarely think of God being hurt (although I admit that nuns in my elementary school experience would talk about how our bad actions would make Jesus cry).

The Gospel gives a warning about a relationship that is dying from a lack of effort by one of the partners. Parables are stories that require some effort to understand. Passive participation is so much easier. I feel that Jesus intends his audience to invest more of themselves than would come from the first century equivalent of watching TV. In my experience as a teacher I know that it is easier to amuse and awe a crowd than it is to make them intellectually engaged. It is easier to turn on ESPN than it is write or paint or the like. I am convinced that Jesus does not want his message to simply be transcribed in stone. The Ten Commandments embody this kind of “memorize it and do it (or don't do it) mentality.” Jesus asks for more. He (like a good teacher) wants listening, reflection and a response.

All of that being said, sometimes a relationship suffers from one partner being silent. My relationship with God (like my relationship with my wife) has gone through the good times as well as the challenging times. I know that I have found my relationship with the Lord easiest when I could see him active in my life. I have experienced the same kinds of things in my relationship with my wife. Things of the world distract us from our relationship with God. Children distract us from our relationship with our partner.

I have been married more than 30 years and have learned through the mistakes growing out of a desire to spend the evening in a lethargic state after a long day. A relationship requires listening and active participation to flourish. A relationship requires a faithful commitment (and recommitments) in order to succeed. My prayer today is for the courage to live up my commitments as a Christian (and maybe as a good husband, too).

Dear Lord,

Protect me from the allure of passivity and appeal of unnecessary distractions.

Keep me actively engaged with you and your work.

Help me to remember this in all of the relationships that matter in my life.

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