

17th Wednesday in Ordinary Time
July 28, 2010
Fr. Joe Bambenek
St. Ignatius of Antioch Church, Cleveland

Jeremiah 15:10,16-32

Psalm 59

Matthew 13:44-46

The two scripture readings that were just proclaimed, which providentially are the readings which are read in all Catholic churches around the world today, seemed particularly appropriate for this Mass of Thanksgiving. As most all of you here know in one way or another, what has happened in my life the past 7 years or so has been not all that different than what we hear in those readings. Entering the seminary and now becoming a priest meant giving up many good things in life. Many of you worked with me and know the professional sacrifice it entailed, including walking away from a job in which I worked with wonderful coworkers both at my company and at other companies in the industry most notably FirstEnergy. And in my personal life there were sacrifices; most notably there were attractive dating possibilities which I had to forsake in order to obtain the field with the treasure, to buy the pearl of great price. Yet despite all that, hopefully I am this evening exuding what has been evident the last two months in a pretty profound way: and that is great joy. The past two months of my life have been the two best months of my life. Those of you who were at the ordination likely saw that I had as big of a smile on my face as any of my classmates, and that smile has pretty much been stuck on my face and in my heart ever since.

Yet to read the gospel without the first reading, from the prophet Jeremiah, might make it look too easy. Jeremiah reminds us that the process of selling all we have to buy the field of treasure or the pearl of great price is not easy, and it is often not just one quick decision. In fact, I myself was perhaps guilty of a kind of over-simplistic thinking: I had the notion that the hard part would be walking away from what I had and could have had, and that after I did that, everything would be easy the rest of the way to the priesthood. While the past two months have been joy-filled, the prior 4 years, and in particular the first 3 years of seminary, were probably the most difficult time of my life. In fact, to help cope with these struggles, during my time in the seminary I helped form a group of seminarians who were older to talk through our challenges. We call the group the Sons of Abraham, not because we are so old. But rather, I proposed the group's name after hearing the story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. You may recall that God asked Abram to walk away from an affluent situation in Iraq to go a place unknown. Abram trusted God and gave up his comfy life. God eventually gave Abram, by then his name was Abraham, the son he always wanted. But when things seemed to be going well, God asked Abraham to give the son back to Him in sacrifice. This story from Genesis is completely in keeping with today's readings, and resonated with me when my fellow seminarians and I were struggling with just how much was being asked of us in the process of selling all for the pearl of great price of the priesthood.

What I have just said is not shared for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or self-pity, but rather, because while the readings may seem particularly fitting for me at this moment in my life, they are relevant to each one of us. All of us are invited to sell what we have for the pearl of great price. No, I am not suggesting that you all turn in your resignations to FirstEnergy first thing tomorrow morning. But what I am saying is that God gave each one of us a vocation... for

most of us it is to be some combination of a loving spouse, a sacrificially encouraging and nurturing parent, and a responsible employee & citizen... What they have in common is that all vocations include setting aside selfishness in favor of self-giving and sacrificial love that bears good fruit in the lives of others. Some of us are already living our vocations. Others, especially the young people here this evening, have yet to discover them. And perhaps others are right now debating whether or not to pay the price to live the vocation to which they feel called. On this last point, I am certainly aware of the hesitation involved in paying the price of sacrifice, as it took me at least 5 years, or as many as 20, depending upon how you want to count it, to do so, to take the step to enter the seminary which has not brought much joy and is starting to bear fruit.

While it can sound so simple in theory, and while true joy is the promise that is extended to all in the end, as part of that vocation, each one of us is called to live in sacrificial love for others. There are seasons when that sacrificial love may seem to bear great fruit and great joy. Yet along the way there will be seasons when the sacrificial love includes much painful sacrifice, often which does not make much sense.

And lest we think that what I am saying is too abstract, let me share a couple examples with you that hit close to home, perhaps even too close to home. The reason we are gathered here at this particular church in Cleveland is because of the witness that my dear friend Angel has been to me the past decade. In a way that I had not appreciated before, and which has opened my eyes to the sacrifices of many other women, Angel has to me been an incredible witness of heroic, sacrificial, motherly love for her three dear children.

For second example. It is now just short of a decade ago when many of us were gathered together at another Cleveland-area church, to celebrate the life of another great vocational witness: Bruce. On that day, in spite of its tragic circumstances, what was so clear was that Bruce was a man who, during his life on Earth, brought great joy to others in addition to much compassion and material support. He was a man who touched so many lives, through his generosity of spirit, through how he lived out a multifaceted vocation of love in his home, in his workplace, in his community, and in his Church.

Of course, those here more deeply familiar with the lives of Angel, Bruce, or I will recognize that none of us are perfect, that there are deficient areas in which growth in holiness is still necessary. For the perfect witness of self-giving love and perfect faithfulness to vocation we can only turn to Jesus Himself, and to His Blessed Mother. So now, as we prepare to receive Jesus in the Eucharist, let us pray that our hearts may become ever more like His Sacred Heart and Mary's Immaculate Heart. And let us also pray that wherever we are at in the process of discerning or embracing or living out our own vocations, that we may have the wisdom and courage to persevere, to pay the price, so that we can ultimately experience His joy, bring that joy to others, and live richly fruitful lives.