

17th Wednesday in Ordinary Time
July 28, 2010
Fr. Joe Bambenek
Holy Trinity Church, McKeesport, PA

Text in red omitted for brevity when the homily was preached.

Jeremiah 15:10,16-32

Psalm 59

Matthew 13:44-46

The two scripture readings that were just proclaimed seem particularly appropriate for the reason I am here today. I was ordained almost exactly two months ago, fittingly for this parish, on the Saturday of Holy Trinity weekend. A tradition for newly ordained priests is, during their first year of ordination, to return to places that have been significant to their vocation to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving. And so I am here to do that this morning. Before I entered the seminary, I worked for an electric power company and spent most of my time negotiating with other power companies, such as Duquesne and Allegheny. During most of the year 1998, I came to this part of Pittsburgh for multi-day meetings on a literally weekly basis. During that time I made a decision that ended up being crucial in my life. I decided to forego some of the comforts of business travel so as to be able to come here, to Holy Trinity Church, to attend daily Mass before my meetings started. Within a year, my job and vocational journeys took me elsewhere and it has been years, perhaps a decade, since I have been to Mass at Holy Trinity. However, the habit of starting my day with Jesus even when I travelled, with a faith community as good as yours, stuck with me. Also sticking with me has been a special fondness and sense of gratitude for Holy Trinity in my heart.

The spiritual strength that comes from daily receiving Jesus in the Eucharist was very important because what has happened in my life the past decade has been not all that different than what we hear in today's readings. Entering the seminary and now becoming a priest meant giving up many good things in life. Yet despite that, this morning I hopefully am 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 most awesome months of my life.

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, often during the past decade, and especially during the first 3 years of seminary, I have felt more like Jeremiah.

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, for the field with buried treasure. No, I am not suggesting that you all need to quit your jobs, sell your homes or leave your spouses so as to become priests and nuns. But what I

am saying is that God gave each one of us a vocation... for most it is to be some combination of being a loving spouse, a sacrificially encouraging and nurturing parent, and a responsible employee or retiree & 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 have yet to discover them through prayer and listening for God's voice. 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 that is why we need Jesus to strengthen us and the saints to encourage us.

For as Jeremiah evidences, we are not the first to struggle with paying the price. When we look to the saints, and see their struggles, we can be encouraged. I am reminded of 2 Corinthians 1, which reads, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all encouragement, 4 who encourages us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. And in Jesus, by receiving the Eucharist daily, we can receive the greatest encouragement of all.

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 our own vocations, that we may turn to our Triune God so as to have the wisdom and courage to persevere, to pay the price, so that we can ultimately experience the joy of the Trinity, and live richly fruitful lives.