

22 Sunday of Ordinary Time A (2014) Deny Yourself

A Biblical Scholar whom I sometimes consult when I prepare my homilies is a French priest named Fr. Lucien Deiss. In commenting on today's first reading from the prophet Jeremiah, he tells the story of a young friend, Marie Claire, who has a brilliant mind and a great love for the Bible. At her oral examination for a degree in philosophy, the professor was quite impressed by the charm of her intelligence. At the end of the examination, the professor asked her, "Mademoiselle, may I ask you of what faith you are?" She answered, "I am Christian." "And if I were to ask you what are your reasons for your faith, what would you answer me?"

Marie Claire responded: "Monsieur, have you read Jeremiah?" The teacher shook his head. Marie Claire went on, "If you had read Jeremiah, chapter 20, verse 7, in what is called the 'Confessions' of Jeremiah, you would see it written: 'O Lord, you

seduced me, and I allowed myself to be taken.’ That is the reason for my faith.”

The translation of that passage from Jeremiah 20 which we read from the Lectionary today says “You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped.” But the literal translation of the Hebrew is “You seduced me, O Lord, and I let myself be seduced.” If you or I were asked the reasons for our faith, we probably would not answer that God had seduced us. And yet that is precisely how Jeremiah, one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, experienced his relationship with God. His encounter with God was so powerful and so personal, that he found God irresistible.

Some of you older parishioners may have children who do not practice their Catholic faith. You may try to persuade them to come back to church through rational argumentation. That approach can be helpful, but it often fails to motivate. How do you think your son or daughter would respond if you said to them, “Why don’t you let God seduce you?” They would probably say something like, “That’s weird!”

And then with a big smile you could go on to say, “Let God win you by the charm of his beauty, to captivate you through the splendor of his love!” Then your child would really be convinced that you had lost it.

But really, you would be speaking about the deepest truth of the human person, namely, that we are built for God. We are born with an innate thirst for the transcendent, for unconditional love, for perfect beauty, for absolute knowledge. These are different ways of referring to the One whom Jesus called, “Abba, Father”

What is the best way to lead a person to this unconditional love and perfect beauty? The best way to attract people to God and to the Christian faith is to allow ourselves to be seduced by God, to quote Jeremiah. When we have fallen in love with God, then we can speak about our own experience of God to our children or to anyone who is seeking God. That’s the most effective way of drawing people to the Lord and to the Church – by sharing openly and without embarrassment what God has done in our

own lives. Then we can invite people to put themselves in environments where God is more easily accessed. That's why we go to church; that's why St. Lucy Parish and School exist -- to make it easier to experience the Lord, his mercy, his guidance, his power.

In today's Gospel, Jesus presents a direct path to experiencing God. He said, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Our true self is created in the image of God. To renounce your self refers to the false self, the egotistical self that has been corrupted by materialism, unhealthy desires, and sin. When Jesus says "deny yourself" he is referring to that false self. One of the most ancient and effective ways of going beyond the false self and finding the true self is Christian meditation.

Some Christians don't realize that Christianity teaches meditation. For the past few years we have been encouraging all our parishioners to meditate on the Word of God. We make it easier for you by

periodically distributing Little Books that have a scripture passage and brief reflection for each day. We will distribute the Little Red Books on the last weekend of September. In the meantime I urge all of you to meditate on the Gospel of Matthew every day—not only adults but also teens. Children can read their Children Bibles every day too. Six minutes is enough to begin the practice. Just start in the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel and read slowly, stopping to pause when some word or phrase catches your attention, and speaking spontaneously with the Lord about what you are reading.

For those who want some something a little deeper, once or twice a year I offer instruction in an ancient and simple form of Christian meditation called the “Jesus Prayer.” It can be practiced by any Christian and it leads us to be increasingly conscious of the presence of Jesus Christ within us. It helps us gradually to become free of negative attitudes and bad habits. It also leads to relaxation of the body and mind.

I will offer instruction in the Jesus Prayer in two weeks on Sunday, September 14, 4 pm in the PAC. The follow-up will be a month later on October 19. The dates are on our parish website. The course is open to anyone, and I especially encourage young adults to learn how to meditate. The young adult world is very stressful and full of distractions. The Jesus Prayer is a simple, powerful antidote to stress and distraction.

All good methods of Christian meditation help us renounce everything that obscures our true self. We all want to be the best version of ourselves, so what would be some good homework for this week? Six minutes of meditation a day. It's a good way to let ourselves be seduced by God.