

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hurricane Harvey levied terror and disaster upon many innocent people in Houston, but it also stirred up heroism and self-sacrifice. People are taking extraordinary measures to rescue those in danger of death. A three-year old child was found clinging to the back of her dead mother afloat in high water. The mother had equipped her daughter with a bright pink backpack, visible to rescuers. The little girl later said in the hospital, “Mama was saying her prayers.” Parents will do anything for their children, even putting their own lives at risk.

A child normally results from the love between two parents. Parents usually first fall in love out of sexual attraction. Many couples who feel this attraction commit to each other in marriage and have children. As the family grows with its moments of joy and stress, the couple may look back on their early days and realize they couldn't have known in advance all that family life involves, and they accepted it all because they were seduced. At a time when immediate pleasure was more tangible than future challenges, they committed to each other, for better or for worse.

Sometimes we regret being seduced. We fall in love with the wrong person, and the relationship suffocates our true selves. Sometimes we fall in love with work, and even when it proves economically ruinous, we refuse to get out of it because of our addiction to it. It can happen with sports. We follow a team so much that it steals time and money from more important concerns. Sometimes kids' activities are seductions. Parents so overcommit to clubs and organizations that they forsake family time at home and Sunday mornings at church.

Other times seduction leads us into something good, and the deeper we embrace it, the more meaningful our life becomes. When we are truly in love, when we are committed to something important, we do actions we otherwise find distasteful; we even put our lives at risk. Family life is one example. The spiritual life is another, as Jeremiah testifies in today's first reading. Jeremiah had received from God a call to be a prophet. He did not want to do it, but using his own word at the beginning of today's reading, he was “duped”- or as it says in Hebrew, “seduced.” If Jeremiah would preach God's word, God promised him good feelings, the kind you would get from a lover. So Jeremiah accepted the deal, but things did not go the way he expected. Instead God had him preach a message of “violence and outrage,” and in return Jeremiah received “derision and reproach all the day.” Who wouldn't want out of that deal? But Jeremiah discovered something further. When he tried not speaking God's word, then, he says, “it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.” Looking over his work and the seduction that led him there, he concludes that it was all good. It doesn't feel good, but to step out of this agreement with God would cause more problems than staying in.

Whenever we reflect on commitments we've made to children, lovers, work or play, it is easy to discern whether those commitments feel rewarding or stressful. What may be harder to discern is the value of the stress. Sometimes the stress we have with our commitments is better than the stress we would have without them. In that case, we stick with them even when we realize we made them because we were seduced.

Sunday, September 3, 2017