

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If you ever go out on a limb, you want to make sure the limb is strong and the tree is sturdy. No one else may join you there, but if it's the right limb, you'll get a great view and win the admiration of others. If it's not, you'll fall, and people will denounce your choice. Or there are times when you're out there, you're convinced it's the right place to be, but no one else sees it that way, and you feel alone.

Jesus forewarns his disciples about days like that, and even worse ones. People may try to knock you off. He said, "do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna." People may hurt you physically, but God can still rescue your spirit.

In preparation for that message the lectionary offers a passage from Jeremiah, whose own friends were denouncing him, and verses from Psalm 69 that carry the same theme. In the psalm we hear the words of a person out on a limb whose own family has denounced the decision. This is a person who, in so many words, heard the message, "Put your trust in God. Follow your conscience. God will take care of you." But it wasn't working. This believer was still in trouble, still the object of criticism, still feeling alone. So, in the psalm, the person prays to God the way you might address someone who made a promise and then walked away. The believer shakes a finger at God and prays, "It is for you that I suffer taunts, that shame has covered my face. To my own kin I have become an outcast, a stranger to the children of my mother. Zeal for your house consumes me, and [—what's my reward?—] taunts against you fall on me." Here was this faithful believer, going out on a limb, trusting in God, and getting insults in return. This prayer begins with the argument, "God, you owe me." It's in the bible that way, so if you ever pray like that, you're not alone.

Then the tone of Psalm 69 shifts. It makes an appeal not based on God's perceived inattention to duty, but on God's love. The psalm continues, "In your great mercy, answer me, O God, with your salvation that never fails. Lord, answer, for your mercy is kind." God's character is loving—constantly loving. Psalm 69 reminds God who God is. Even at a moment when support is lacking, the psalm still has faith and appeals to God's friendship to get out of trouble.

The final verses bear testimony to God's goodness in the past: "the Lord listens to the needy, and does not spurn his own in their chains."

When we're in trouble, it's sometimes due to our own bad choices. But other times trouble results from good choices. We do the right things, but other people don't support us. And when they abandon us, denounce us, or attack us, we have to make yet another choice. Do we stay with what we believe is right? Do we trust our faith in God? Do we pray to God for help? Psalm 69 says, "Go for it. Tell God you're in trouble because of him. It's his fault." Then appeal to God's goodness. Invite him to act according to his good nature. Remind yourself about God's enduring love for the poor and the benevolent power he continually reveals in the beauty of creation, like a sturdy tree. And ask. Be hopeful and ask for help. We can use the refrain we sang today: "Lord, in your great love, answer me."