

January 31, 2016 – Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Psalm 71:1-6, 15-17; 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13 or 13:4-13; Luke 4:21-30

“If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Is it possible, do you think, to give away all you have and not have love? Or to offer your body, and not have love? How could one give so much and not be loving? St. Paul advises that such sacrifices can indeed be made without love in one’s heart. What’s in an attitude and how to recognize a prophet are questions raised in today’s readings.

People in our neighborhoods and all around the world live through tragedies we cannot even imagine. Touched by news of such suffering we sometimes make donations to help those involved and at the same time we pray, thanking God for our many blessings. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we might even believe that these catastrophes might have been prevented if people did things differently, more like we do. Today’s readings challenge us to look closely at our attitudes as we give. Love is not conceited or proud. It is not what we do, what we give, but how, in what spirit, that counts.

Today we heard about Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet to the nations and about the prophet, Jesus, at home in Nazareth where he grew up. When Jesus announced that he had come to bring good news to the poor and free the oppressed, folks were impressed. By his message? No, by his eloquence. In the end they wanted to throw him over a cliff. What happened here? They did not want to be challenged to examine their lives and to hear about captives being freed. People wanted miracles. Prophets challenge us, to take a look at the way we live.

When I first heard a call to mission almost 50 years ago, I believed it meant I would leave home in Minnesota, go to another country and do some good. I started out maybe not thinking of myself as a prophet to the nations, but certainly “a missionary” to the nations. These days I wonder who is in mission to whom. People set themselves on fire or go on hunger strikes to protest wars. Those called “suicide bombers” die for what they believe is a good cause. And yet, if I give up my body for martyrdom and have not love... Who are today’s prophets? What is their message, and above all, what spirit lives in their hearts?

In my walks around the neighborhood here in Tanzania I see empty cement bags converted into containers for growing vegetables. Worn-out bed nets cover gardens to keep the chickens out. Kids have fun making toy cars and buses from empty cans. One young boy made himself a guitar from a discarded piece of wood, bent roofing nails and some wire. A piece of old water hose is now a swing. When things are worn out, no longer useful for their original purpose, they are re-used for something else. This is a re-use, re-make, repair society.

Every day I see courageous women trying to make ends meet for their families. Every day I witness how hard people work and how wholehearted is their trust in God. The first prayer in the morning is to thank God for waking up, alive, to a new day. The prayer that follows is about the rain. Rain means food for the family. “I have my field, my hoe, seeds and health. Where is the rain?” It is up to God, people say, but it cannot be counted on like in the past. While they believe it is up to God, they also know that cutting trees and global warming are involved.

Love is respecting one another’s ways, learning from one another, knowing that my choices affect people half way around the world. Maybe if I did things differently their lives would be better. Working BEGA KWA BEGA (shoulder to shoulder) is the way such respect and cooperation is described in the Swahili language. Prophets are the ones who remind us of love’s qualities and challenge us to live them.