

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary time

September 15-16, 2018

Readings: Isaiah 50: 5-9a; Psalm 116: 1-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35

Preacher: Deni Mack

Tiffany carries the cross of poverty, pain, frustration and overwhelming responsibility. Four courses shy of her social work degree she had to take a leave of absence due to illness. Now her health is better, her children are in school, she has taken in her ex-husband's teenage daughter from another of his relationships *and* she provided mental health advocacy and care for another of his women. One of her sons is disabled; all were abused by their father and his other children; all are traumatized.

Nicole gave her sister one-half the monthly rent only to find her sister had not paid *her* share of the rent. Their subsequent eviction caused Nicole, her sister and all of their children to move in with their parents. Imagine twelve people living in a three-bedroom house! Imagine the grocery bills! Nicole quit her health care job because the local coffee shop pays better and gives her regular hours!

What kind of a cross do we lay on our health workers when we don't demand a living wage for skilled med techs, for those who care for our elderly and infirm, for those who work forty hours a week? Her nurse supervisor is still singing Nicole's praises after five years of working together plus the last five years as she watched Nicole go from job to job looking for better wages.

Tiffany and Nicole pray with great faith. They pray with their children who are delightful and helpful. You would be impressed by how they cope with poverty, how they do in school, at play, at home, waiting for their mother.

I asked Tiffany and Nicole, "who do you say Jesus is?" Their silence was sobering and then Nicole said with a tear in her eye, "Oh Jesus suffered far more than I do. I can take this. He endured more. I am not alone. I can help others."

Tiffany offered, "I don't know anymore. I wonder why God lets horrible things happen and then I just ask for his help to get through this, to help my boys grow to be good men: Reliable, Responsible men. That is what matters; Jesus helps me raise them. Jesus helps me make all the calls to the doctor, to get the help my son needs."

Nicole wondered, "He is my Lord and my Savior but I want my words to mean something; those words are what I say but what do they mean? Was Jesus in the woman who told me to come and see the house for rent but not in her husband once he saw me? Why was she so

nice and he so mean? Are we ever going to get a place for my children and me to live? Rents are so high and pay is so low. When I walked one hour to work each day and took double shifts and walked one hour home so late each night or early the next morning, I talked to Jesus all the way. I'm not afraid. Jesus is with me."

I hear Isaiah's suffering servant in these women. Their ears are open; they have not rebelled and God is their help but oh how I want them to have more help! God is near to them in their suffering; God is hearing their pleas. Our parish's Mercy fund; our local interfaith pastoral association's Good Neighbor fund and agencies respond in small ways in emergencies, but poor people are getting poorer; we see it daily. Know that Nicole's and Tiffany's parents worked at jobs that paid living wages. Their daughter's poverty is a cross they now bear.

Today's letter of James cautions us against merely saying to those who suffer, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat well." As followers of Christ, we follow Jesus who says, "whoever loses his life for my sake... will save it." How do we lay down our lives for the Nicoles and Tiffanys of this world?

A young woman asked, "when will the Church lay down its life for victims who were abused by priests?" A prophetic response suggests—at a minimum, we will believe and care for victims, hold perpetrators and those who covered up for them accountable to civil authority, raise the statute of limitations and prioritize the protection of vulnerable people.

I've been told our Rochester diocese enforces the charter of protection of vulnerable people. With thought and prayer we acknowledge that the expression, "reduce the pedophile to the lay state," suggests that lay people are inferior, thus violating the promises made in our baptism. We ask God to guide us as we each try to alleviate suffering.