

Today's theme is about speaking out, a prospect that can strike terror in the heart of any Christian. Jeremiah certainly understood this, as the first reading reveals, and his utter confidence in God's protection is breathtaking. "The Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph." And, in an utterly human way, he makes the simple request, "O Lord of hosts, you who test the just, who probe mind and heart, let me witness the vengeance you take on them..." Yes, Lord, give me a front row seat when you start smiting my enemies. How often has that prayer come unbidden to your lips? Let me count the ways!

But let's take a step back and consider the different ways of "speaking out". I see three different modes:

1. Evangelizing and teaching
2. Speaking truth to power
3. Defending the faith from attack

First, evangelizing and teaching. Many people feel unqualified to go this route. But a little study, a little practice, and before you know it, it gets easy. This has certainly been my experience, and to be honest, I find this duty a joy and a privilege. Helping people see that the choice for Jesus Christ as lived out in the Catholic Church is a choice for love, peace, and community is fascinating and enlightening. Often I find that the Spirit of the Lord will speak through me with the exact words needed for a particular person at a particular place and time. Did this ever happen to you? It's a pathway that's open to any of us – just chat with Pam about our needs in the School of Religion, or RCIA, or Adult Faith Formation. We need teachers and evangelizers!

Next there's speaking truth to power, which is exactly how it sounds. This can be terrifying – it certainly requires confidence and a deep prayer life. This is Jeremiah the prophet's profession, and he would be quick to tell you that it is a thankless job. By the time of this reading, poor Jeremiah has been persecuted, imprisoned, mocked, thrown in a well to die, and otherwise mistreated. In our gospel reading, it is clear that Jesus knows all about the risks of speaking truth to power, yet his cool confidence comes across with a clarion call. "Fear no one!" he tells the disciples. "You're more important to God than you think. "Speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." In today's age, what does this look like? We immediately think politics and hot button issues, and many shy away. But it

doesn't need to be dramatic and loud. A well considered respectful email to a politician is surprisingly effective. Your simple presence at a pro-life rally provides encouragement to everyone else – there is indeed strength in numbers. But be prepared – staking a claim to a strong viewpoint invites challenge and insult, persecution and worse. But Jesus' words are clear – be not afraid of those who kill the body – for they cannot touch your soul.

Defending the faith from attack is the third mode of speaking out. This is challenging because we are often caught off-guard. We're at a work function and somehow religion rears up and someone casually disses the Catholic Church to the laughter of all. There you stand, speechless, angry but afraid to say anything because you're not sure where this is going. Did that person really mean it? Was it the beer speaking? Is this the time and place to have an argument? After all, they don't really know you very well – do you want a reputation as a holy-roller or “one of those people”? My quick prayer in circumstances such as this is simple: “Forgive them, Lord, for they do not know what they are saying...”

You're correct, however, if you find that a bit unsatisfying – especially when you come up with 5 or 6 really great responses as you're driving home that evening. I should have said this, or I should have pointed that out, or yada, yada, yada. It's maddening how smart and snappy we are hours after an encounter! Here's a quick example – I was with a small group of people talking about new age stuff – you know what I mean – crystals and energy fields and pyramids. But one person was clearly taking it seriously and the question arose, “What religion were you raised in?” The flippant response? “Oh, I'm a recovering Catholic.” Har har. I don't know about you, but I am so tired of that comment. But as usual, I was caught flat-footed and the conversation quickly turned in a different direction. Later on, I had several great responses:

I'm a recovering Catholic. Oh? The Church has had no trouble recovering from you!

I'm a recovering Catholic. Oh? Let me know when you find something better.

I'm a recovering Catholic. Oh? I doubt it was from an overdose.

Those sure feel good, but I don't think any of them really help the conversation, do they? There's a better way. Can you see such a comment as a cry for help? Sometimes when a person is bitter or angry, their only

acceptable recourse is humor or sarcasm. Yes, they may be looking for a cheap laugh, but maybe not. So get that person aside afterwards and ask the simple question – were you really raised Catholic? What happened? Why the bitterness? In other words, show that you have taken their comment seriously. At the very least, they'll back down, but you never know. They might open up and share a hurt or a disappointment or an abusive “church person” story that we've all heard at some point. You can hear them getting worked up and angry, all over again. You have permission, in fact, on behalf of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, I give you permission to say, “You know what, that was wrong. On behalf of the Church, I apologize.” You may be the only apology that person will ever hear. So resist the snappy comeback. Resist the snide remark. Nothing deflects sarcasm and insult like a loving, calm response. Don't get defensive. Pray a brief prayer and ask that simple question – gosh, that's sad. What brought you to this point?

We all wish that we had the wisdom of Jesus, and the guts of Jeremiah the prophet, or the courage of St. Paul. Their fearlessness is admirable. But remember, you have the same something that they each had, namely, the love of God in their heart and soul. You can bet that they tapped into that love before they did or said anything. You can do the same thing. Start small, respond with respect and love, and who knows? You might be the best thing that has happened to that person in a long, long, time. That's better than any snappy response. You get to be like Jesus, a mighty champion.