

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Responding to Faith, Saints Perpetua and Felicity

My family comes from Northern New Jersey, in the Paterson, Jersey City area. Back in 1981, I helped my parents move to Palm Harbor into the house that I am living in now. About ten years later, I visited my Uncle Mike, my God-father, up in Paterson. He said that he was sure that my parents would eventually move back to Paterson, this is who they were and where they belonged. Now, I knew that my folks were not planning on returning North, but they could have. Indeed there have been many retirees who have made a decision to finish their days with their children and grandchildren. Actually, some retirees have decided to leave Florida and move to North Carolina. The people of that state refer to them as half-backs. People can turn back from their lives here. But no one can turn back from their life with God. With God, there is no turning back, as the song says.

Today's readings speak about faith and our response to faith. They begin with Abraham, the Father of Faith. Abraham was a prosperous man of his time, living in Ur, located in the fertile area between the Tigris and Euphrates River. He became convinced that God was calling him, directing him. He had faith that God would care for him. He trusted in God to build his offspring into a nation, even though he had no children by his wife, Sarah. Abraham was a man of faith. He had faith in God, and he had faith that what God was asking him to do would be for the good of others, his offspring, and myriads and myriads of people, more numerous than the sands of the shore. Because of Abraham's faith, God's Son, the Savior, would come through these people. When in *Genesis 24*, Abraham sent his servant to Ur to find a wife for his son, Isaac, Abraham made it clear that the servant was never to take Isaac himself back to Ur. There would be no turning back.

We are people of faith. We are everyday, normal people, who realize where happiness can be found. *The Letter to Hebrews* defines faith: Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. We have all been given the means to grow in faith life. We have been given the Eucharist. We have the Mass. We have the sacrament of penance. The love of God is so strong in our lives that there are times we can feel this love all through our bodies. We know that the Kingdom of God is real even though we cannot see it. We are people of faith who are determined to proclaim the Kingdom of God with our lives. We want to share the Good News with others. We want to fulfill the Lord's mandate to go and proclaim the Gospel to the world. We have been given a gift that we must share with the world. We cannot turn back to a life without God. We have to follow Him.

I want to once more tell you the story of two young girls, just ordinary girls of their time, who were so full of faith, who felt the love of God so strongly in their lives, that they were determined to lead others to Christ, even if this were to cost them their lives.

The year was 202. The place was Carthage, in North Africa, modern day

Tunisia. Carthage was part of the Roman Empire. The celebration of the emperor's birthday was coming up and there would be free games in all the major cities of the empire. People could go and watch gladiators fight to the death. Great fun. Between sections of these fights, there would be a break for food, sort of a halftime. Those who stayed in the stadium would get a great show, though. People who were condemned to death would be march out to be killed for the enjoyment of the spectators. Nice folks.

There was a young noble woman in Carthage, 22 years old, and her servant girl, about the same age. Both were pregnant, the noblewoman farther along than her servant. They heard a missionary speak about Jesus Christ, and the eternal kingdom. They heard about the Love of God, and the gift of spiritual life. These were all concepts foreign to the materialistic Roman Empire. Just as these concepts are foreign to so many in our world who live only for the fleeting pleasures of life. The two girls decided to take instructions and join these people of Jesus Christ, these Christians. The closer they came to Christ, the greater their joy. They were given Christian names. The noble woman was called Perpetua, forever faithful. Her servant girl, Felicity, the Happy One. They knew that becoming Christian could be dangerous. They might even be called upon to choose Christ or death. But they wanted others to experience their joy. And they wanted others to realize the Love of God in Jesus Christ. They were both were determined to give witness to Christ. There was no way that they would keep their joy to themselves.

Perpetua had her baby, a boy, and was nursing the child when someone accused her and Felicity of being Christians. If they did not deny Christ, they would be put to death. Perpetua's father pleaded with her. Perpetua responded that for her to deny Christ would be to deny her very self. "This is who I am, " she said, "I am a Christian." Felicity also was determined to give witness to the Lord. Perhaps others would find Christ. They were arrested and thrown into a horrible prison, a hole, really. Perpetua wrote in her diary that she could put up with the prison, but her greatest pain was that they had taken her child away from her. But she would not give up Christ.

The games were coming up. A show was needed for between the contests. Perpetua and Felicity and three others were condemned to be thrown to the wild beasts. Only, there was a problem. Felicity was still pregnant, at the very end of the pregnancy. Strange, but the Romans would not kill a pregnant girl because that would be killing her baby. The situation resolved itself when Felicity had her baby in prison, just two days before the games.

The events were grisly. The Romans dressed the girls up as Naiads, or pagan goddesses, in very skimpy clothes. When they were marched out into the arena so much of them was revealed that the people realized that the girls were both new mothers. They yelled that they did not want to see new mothers killed. So the Romans took them away and clothed them both in heavy clothes, then marched them back out. What happened next is detailed. A herd of wild heifers was release into the arena, basically stampeding the girls, goaring them, knocking them both out. After the

dust settled, Perpetua regained consciousness. She found herself pushed up into one of the walls of the arena, in a pool of blood. She looked for Felicity. She was also pushed against the same wall, but was still unconscious. And then Perpetua heard the crowd. "We can't see them," they cried, "We can't see." A large part of the arena could not see what was happening against the wall by their seats. They felt cheated. So Perpetua struggled to her feet, and dragged herself over to Felicity. Felicity woke up and asked what happened. "I don't know what that was," Perpetua said, "but we have to give testimony to Christ for all to see." And they dragged themselves to the center of the arena. The people were suddenly quiet. They had never seen such determination. This whole thing went in the wrong direction for the Romans. They wanted to dissuade people from becoming Christians, not have people marvel at these girls' courage. Soldiers quickly came out and killed them both.

"Come out, come out to the center of the arena and give testimony." We are all called to do that. The center of the arena is where those who reject Christ are calling us to suffer for Him. The center of the arena is where we need to go to give witness to the Lord. The proper response to our faith is to lead others to Christ. We have chosen Christ. There is no turning back.

Let's picture ourselves as Felicity, or, for the men, as Felix. There is Perpetua waking us up calling us to join her in the center of the arena. We get up to go, but.....but.....we are chained to the wall. Something is keeping us from giving testimony to Christ. What is it? Is it a bad relationship? Perhaps, we might say, "I know it's wrong, but I don't want to give it up. I'd have to break up the relationship. So we'd rather be chained to the wall than give testimony to Christ." Or we might say, "I'm not just addicted to.....you name it, porn, alcohol, or other drugs. I like it. I've got my secret stash. I'd have to give that up, destroy it, to give testimony to the Lord." We'd rather remain in chains? We might say, "I don't want to give up my friends, but if I'm not doing what they are doing, I'll lose them." So, we'd rather stay chained to the wall of the arena than give testimony to Christ in the center of the arena. Or perhaps we have been wronged and are so full of hate that we'd rather stew in our own hatred than give testimony to the One who is Love Become Flesh.

We have got to let Jesus break that which is chaining us to the wall. In Him is Freedom. The readings for today conclude with the warning to be ready for the Lord. He has given us a great deal. He has given us meaning for life. He has given us the opportunity for eternal life. He has given us happiness. The reading concludes: "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more." What we have been given, our faith, has been given to us for others. The world needs us so badly. Look at how upset the world is. Look at how upset the country is. The world needs us to proclaim with our lives that there is so much more to life than all the nonsense around us. And, yes, this often takes courage and often costs us friends, or positions in society. We are not concerned with that. We are concerned with our obligation to the world to be who we are: People of Jesus Christ, People of Faith. For us there is no turning back.

St. Perpetua, St. Felicity, pray for us.