

Twenty third Sunday

I have always had respect for the prophets of the Old Test. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Job and Jeremiah. The role of the prophet in the Jewish community was to bring a message forward, to bring everyone back on course, to give a lesson received from God, often around an injustice in their community. Prophets spoke up for the people who had no voice, the blind, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.

Those were the people in Jewish culture who lived with shame; they experienced poverty, or disability, or abandonment, or social exclusion, and were often held down by the **stigma** their communities put on them. But the **God** for whom Isaiah speaks is a God of justice, and faithfulness to the oppressed. He sets captives free.

In the second reading it's interesting how St. Paul talks about how a stigma occurs in the early Christian assembly. He points

out the tendency we have to give preference to the person of means, and to not give preference to the person at the assembly who may be dressed in shabby clothes. He reminds the early Christians they can “become judges with evil designs.”

Judging someone as something they are not, due to their circumstances is, in my opinion, the perfect definition of a stigma. A stigma is an evil design. When a culture imposes a stigma, what does the stigmatized person feel? They feel shame. Stigma and shame exist in a sort of spiral relationship, one builds the other, or compounds the other, and the result is never good.

The historical time when Jesus lived was a difficult one—politically and socially. It was not unlike the times in which we find ourselves living. Father Dave and I were talking about **this** the other day. Our culture is split. We have our predominate culture in Aroostook county, but also within all our communities is

an extensive under-culture of people who are struggling and oppressed by addiction. I guess I don't have to tell you that drug addiction is a huge social problem in this area and it is one that has touched most everyone's lives.

Since I work in the recovery field, when I read today's scriptures I was immediately aware of how it relates to our social problem of addiction.

I talk with patients and with other professionals a lot in my work, and we talk about addiction, and what it is.... but a greater amount of time is spent talking about what we call recovery.

Recovery is the process a person goes through as they are freed from the prison of addiction. We talk about what people in recovery need, and what are the different stages of recovery, because researchers know that recovery proceeds in stages, and we talk about how people in each stage needs something different from us.

I have worked a lot with people in early recovery, whose primary need is reassurance. Through the addiction they have compromised their health, often times their morals, their sense of right and wrong, They have alienated family and friends. They have little or no hope and after they stop using they need to be reassured—reassured they can do it, they can heal and recover, and they need to be told over and over that they have value as a person. Their dignity as a human being needs to be affirmed.

How can that happen ?

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE. I was told a story by a young man in recovery who gave credit to a 75 year old man who was a recovery coach in a men's group that was taking place in a church near the young man's home. He said, "You know when I went into that group I thought to himself." "What is this old guy gonna tell me?" "How can this old dude possibly help me." But, he said, " you know the best thing he did? He kept telling me over and over that I was a good man, that he could see I was a person who wanted to do the right thing, and take care of my

family, He helped me realize I could do this, but mostly he helped me feel like a good person again.

Isn't that simple. This older gentleman, no doubt a retiree, had helped a young man in recovery overcome his **shame for being an addict**. And that's the attitude we can have as a recovering community. We need to help people in recovery to remember their essential dignity as people and help them know they are good and they can heal and get better.

With regard to this addiction crisis, I think our community is like the man in our Gospel today who is brought forward for the healing of Jesus. We are, sort of, like the deaf man with a speech impediment. We may not want to continue hearing about this addiction problem, it seems never-ending, we may want to put our head in the sand, and we may have a hard time to talk about it. Why is that?

Well, first of all it's painful, we've all been touched by it, it hurts to look right at it, it's hard to watch someone you love suffer like

that; and frankly we feel powerless, it seems huge, especially when we don't really understand it. All those things, all our misunderstanding and misperceptions, whether we intent them to or not, can perpetuate the stigma our community puts on the person with addiction. And that is an unnecessary obstacle these people are forced to overcome.

I see people with addiction in our community like the widows of the old testament, so many young women raising children alone, They are like the fatherless, so many young men never having the benefits of a positive male role model, they can compare to the prisoners, who need to be set free— from addiction, and they are without hope, without trust, and full of shame. But yet, they are our brothers, our sisters, and our children, and rather than contributing to the stigma against them we need to to help them know: that with the right people around them recovery is possible. And we can be those right people.

There is a company in southern Maine called MaineWorks which connects men and women who have been incarcerated on drug

charges, with construction companies who are willing to give them a chance and a job. And it was started by a woman in recovery from addiction herself who has now won national awards for her employment vision.

The entire country of Portugal has turned their addiction problem around by connecting drug rehabilitation with vocational rehabilitation. Which means when an addict decides they have had enough and they come into recovery the first things they are given are treatment and a job.

The life chances of a person who comes into recovery are increased dramatically when they live in a supportive community. That would be a community that stands ready to help in whatever way it can. When that choice is made, the recovering community can make an enormous difference.

The recovering community can affirm and encourage. It can teach and guide. It can help someone get a GED, or teach them how to write a resume, or how to conduct themselves in a job interview. It can give someone a chance at employment, help

them learn to balance a check book, open a bank account, or teach them some parenting skills. Many skills that most of us take for granted have been lost by a person with addiction, or maybe never learned in the first place.

And when we, as a recovering community do these things, we are the hands of Christ. We will see the miracles happen, We are helping the deaf to hear, giving sight to the blind, and setting captives free.