

# Homily for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 29-30, 2020

Readings: Jeremiah 20: 7-9; Romans: 12: 1-2; Matthew 16: 21-27

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As we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment this month, local hero Susan B. Anthony got some well-deserved attention. As an advocate, author, and agitator, she did not meet her society's expectations of womanhood. A quote often attributed to her declares, "Independence is happiness." She boldly put herself in the spotlight demanding attention and action on behalf of her cause, and we honor her because of it.

A more recent local hero, Abby Wambach, published a book last year entitled *Wolfpack*, in which she promotes new rules for women that include "demand what you deserve," "lead now—from wherever you are" and "believe in yourself." *Wolfpack* became a New York Times best seller and its unflinching call for women to actualize their potential is inspiring many.

The similarity between Susan B. Anthony and Abby Wambach is clear; they are strong women blazing their own trails, asserting themselves, and crying out for recognition.

Jesus' voice in this Sunday's Gospel seems dissonant. He says, "Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me." What the heck is a Rochesterian, feminist, Catholic Theology nerd like me supposed to do with that?

Women's suffrage didn't happen because Susan B. Anthony denied herself. Abby Wambach didn't become the most successful soccer player in history and a best selling author by being a follower. How can the message and example of these extraordinary women be so different from that of Jesus? I suspect it has much to do with how we understand that phrase "deny yourself."

Especially for women, the advice to deny oneself is problematic. All too often in our world today, women are expected to deny themselves. This is obviously true in parts of the world where women do not have equal access

to education and participation in decision-making structures. But it remains true right here in our own country. When our fellow citizens elected a leader who bragged about sexually assaulting women, it revealed that women were expected to deny their own safety and dignity and back an abusive man in a position of tremendous authority.

The fact that fewer than 10 percent of the Fortune 500 companies have female CEOs demonstrates that women are most often expected to deny their own potential for success and support men as they climb the ladders of power. Even in our own Church, we are expected to deny our gifts and vocation as our voices are forbidden from the pulpit and relegated to this website. And all too often women are highly praised for their selfless care for their families—often at the expense of their own professional goals or social and emotional well-being. In many ways, self-denial is seen as the ideal for womanhood, and it's hurting millions of women.

So how can women in particular hear Jesus' call "deny yourself" as Good News? Only in the context of the bigger picture. Jesus' actions, especially those toward women, show us that he wasn't asking for his disciples to get on board with society's idea of selflessness. When Martha was cleaning and cooking and exhausting herself to be hospitable to Jesus, he told her she made the wrong choice and she should have a seat and relax. When the woman with the hemorrhage literally pushed her way through the crowd to touch him and claim healing for herself, he praised her for it. Jesus didn't want the passive self-abandonment that society demands of women.

Rather, the self-denial that Jesus models and calls for is rooted in a deep conviction of one's God-given dignity. At the time of his baptism, Jesus experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit and understood himself as beloved by God. It was this knowledge of his worth in the eyes of God that empowered him to give of himself. And the self-emptying love that Jesus embodied throughout his ministry and especially on the cross was always his choice. He knew that he was loved by God and he then chose to give his time, his presence, his life in order to help others know that they too are God's beloved.

For many of us then—especially for us women—before we jump to self-denial, we must pause to first ensure that we are self-aware. We must truly know ourselves as a person of dignity and worth, a person created in God’s own image, a person beloved by God. This knowledge gives us the power to chose to pour out our love (which comes from God’s love for us) in service of others. In this recognition, the dissonance between the messages of Jesus, Susan B. Anthony, and Abby Wambach can become harmonious. All three demonstrate the power of a self-aware person who choses to pour him/herself out for the greater good. It is this power that saves us.