

When I read in our gospel reading Jesus saying, "...it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" I immediately remember in my mind the images I had of Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders from my days as a child in Sunday school. Artists always drew the Pharisees as a sour looking self-righteous and judgmental bunch. They were obviously the bad guys and Jesus was the good guy.

I know what the artist was trying to get across, but as an adult I have to remind myself that I cannot oversimplify the religious leaders in that way. To get a better understanding of them, and to understand Jesus' lament over Jerusalem I come at it with a back door approach and use what is called family systems theory.

Family systems theory is pretty easy to understand, it's common sense really, although psychiatric professionals consider it a major breakthrough. One of the fundamental things with family systems theory is that birth order plays a major role in

who you become. That's no surprise. People who were the first born children tend to be more mature, more responsible, and more reliable than those who were the last born in the family.

Why? Consider any large family. What do mom and dad do as the kids get older? They ask the oldest child to help out more. The oldest may be a teenager and the youngest still in diapers. Mom needs to run some errands and so what does she say to the oldest? "I have to be gone for a little while. Look after your brothers and sisters until I get back and don't let them get into trouble."

The baby in the family never ever gets that kind of responsibility because there's nobody left who is younger. In fact the exact opposite happens. What happens when mom gets back from running her errands and she discovers that the youngest has made a huge mess? Mom gets mad. She may yell at the youngest who made the mess, but she is sure to round on the oldest and say, "I told you to watch after your brothers and sisters. But when I get back I see what you let happen." And the oldest gets in trouble too. The baby of the family pretty quickly realizes that he or she can do anything wrong and someone else is going to take the blame for it.

When I think about this sort of thing I always remember what happened with my grandmother and grandfather. My grandmother was the oldest in her small family. Her dad needed all the help he could get in the fields, so she was expected to do a lot of field labor. My grandfather, on the other hand, was several years younger than his three brothers and the only girl came along a few years after him. His mother kept him around the house as basically a scullery maid doing cooking, cleaning and sewing.

When my grandparents got married my grandmother actually had pointers to give my grandfather about how to plow a field, and my grandfather had lots of cooking advice for my grandmother. And if I'm honest, as I think back on my grandfather's farming skills and my grandmother's cooking skills they probably would have been better off sticking to their childhood roles!

Now there are certainly families that don't fit, but in general eldest children are the responsible types. Youngest children are more playful. And once these roles get established they are almost impossible to break.

Almost every family wants to stay stable. If you are the oldest child and you are responsible the whole family expects you to always be responsible - even well into adulthood. If you are the black sheep of the family and you suddenly make good in life your family may not know what to do with you. Some families even push the black sheep to stay the black sheep because that is their role.

And these dynamics go for more than just families. They go for companies, whole towns, and of course, churches. Have you ever had a person in the church do a lot of things but then something happens - that person moves away, or gets sick, or dies, or just can't do it anymore. And out of the goodness of your heart you step in to help out. Except you feel like you have no freedom. You are expected to do it the other person's way. The system of the church doesn't want to change. It wants to keep things as they were - when the other person was doing it.

These systems of expectations are powerful, incredibly powerful. And I think that is a good way to understand Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. For centuries God had been sending

prophets to them to tell them that they were doing things wrongly. The people had gotten the idea that God wanted proper rituals and sacrifices from them. They saw the religious law as a set of regulations to be followed to the letter. If you did it right God would like you. If you messed up on them, God would punish you. But the prophets said over and over again, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. God does not have a giant ledger keeping track of good deeds vs. misdeeds and the balance has to tip one way or you are in trouble. No, God desired them to live with genuinely loving hearts, not have selfish hearts that wanted to exploit every loophole in the rules they could find.

Of course this sounds like a great idea. Who wouldn't want it? But to change to that would require a major upheaval. Many people's livelihoods were wrapped up in the rules. Priests and leaders depended upon the status and salaries their roles brought them. People who thought themselves righteous because they followed the rules considered themselves to be better than "those sinners" who didn't, or couldn't follow the rules. Rich people stayed rich because of the rules and poor people stayed poor because of the rules. It was a system. Everyone had a place, and they didn't want it to change. Even a poor person

who you'd think would want to get out of poverty may not really want to. If you know how to be poor but you don't know how to be rich you may not want to take the risk of being rich lest you fail at it because rich people have a lot of obligations.

And so God's desires were shut out repeatedly and violently. Look at what does happen to Jesus when he tries to change the system. He gets crucified for it!

Jesus laments the way the good people of Jerusalem were trapped in their systems of life and couldn't seem to get out of them. Even though God wanted to come and gather them together like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings they refused. God wanted to proclaim release from the oppressive systems. They wouldn't hear it.

Jesus words speak to us today too, because if we're honest with ourselves there are many things - many systems - in life that bind us. How much of what you do is motivated by what you truly want to do or is motivated by what other people expect of you? And I'm not talking about a wife having to nag her husband because he's slow in accomplishing the 'honey do' list. I'm

talking about the systems and roles and expectations that your family, your friends and your community have set for you. You are not bound by them. You are set free - not to be selfish - but to follow God's good and nourishing will for you.

When the Pharisees told Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him Jesus basically says he doesn't care. He's going to go on with what his Father in heaven has called him to do. He will do it with confidence and certainty knowing that the future is in God's hands.

You are free from all that binds you; free to be what God has created you to be. And that is a good, productive and loving person. Do not be afraid to let God's love nourish and sustain you this day and always. Amen