

Deacon Randy Perkins
Jeremiah 20: 10-13
Romans 5: 12-15
Matthew 10: 26-33

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
EPIPHANY CATHOLIC CHURCH
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One of the most vivid early childhood memories I have of my dad is from a trip our family took to Disney World when I was four years old. We were at the hotel pool, and I hadn't yet learned to swim. So, I was in the kiddie pool with my mom, splashing around, having a great time, and totally safe.

My dad and older brother were in the big people's deep pool, tossing diving rings in the water and then racing to see who could get them first, and even though I was having fun where I was, I wanted to be in the deep water with them. My mom assured me that when I was older, I'd be able to play in the deep pool, but for now, it was too dangerous.

At some point, when we were all out of the water, I asked my dad when I'd be able to be in the big pool. I was taken by surprise when he said, "If you want to be in the big pool, all you have to do is jump in." That idea didn't sit well with my mom, but it sounded great to me, until it came time to jump in. Then, the reality of the danger hit me, and my mom's fear suddenly seemed very reasonable, and I froze. I said, "I don't want to do this anymore, I'm scared."

I remember my dad being in the water, his arms up toward me, open, and saying, "Just jump in. Don't be scared. I've got you." I trusted my dad completely, but his saying "I've got you" didn't make me any less afraid. I was scared to death. Eventually, though, I took the leap and jumped in! I certainly wasn't diving to the bottom to chase rings, but I had managed to place my dad's trustworthiness ahead of my reasonable fear.

What did my dad mean when he told me, "Don't be scared"? Did he want me to think water isn't dangerous? Of course not. Lots of people, even accomplished swimmers, die every year in water. Water is inherently dangerous, and there's always risk, so it makes sense to be afraid.

My dad wasn't making any statement at all about the water. He was making a statement about himself, saying, "Trust me, I've got you." When I finally allowed my trust in him to override my fear, I began to discover how much richer and fuller water life was once I moved from the shallow water into the deep pool!

In today's gospel, Jesus is giving the apostles their mission, and the first words we heard from him were, "Fear no one." Jesus liked to say that a lot, especially when it made 100% good sense to be very afraid. I'd like to share with you what Jesus had said immediately before he told them to "fear no one."

First, he told them that when they go, they should take no money, no bag, and no extra clothes or sandals. And it gets better! He said:

I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you into their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name.

Oh, and one more thing: Don't be afraid!

Did Jesus really expect them not to be afraid? Of course not. Jesus knew they had every good reason to be afraid, and being fully human himself, he understood their fear. Being also fully divine, however, he understood that facing down their fear and jumping into the deep water of a true Christian life was well worth the risk, and the long-term benefits far outweighed the short-term costs. So, he begged them to allow their trust in him to override their very reasonable human fears of everything that possibly could and eventually would come to pass.

Today, Jesus offers us the same invitation he offered the early disciples: "Just jump in. Don't be scared. I've got you," and his invitation begs the question, "How deep is the water of our current faith life?" Have we jumped into that deep pool? Are we navigating the deep, dangerous water with Jesus? Or are we content splashing around in the safe, shallow kiddie pool?

And if we're still in the splash pool, what is the fear that keeps us out of the deep end? There's no shame in acknowledging our fears because the dangers are real, the costs can be high, and the concerns are rational.

Playing in the shallow end of the Jesus pool is easy, even relaxing: Going to Mass occasionally, saying grace before most meals, giving some money to the church, and proudly telling everyone we're Christian.

The deep water where Jesus calls us is a different experience. It's inherently dangerous, and it requires us to overcome our natural fear and resistance. In the shallow water, we can talk a lot and enjoy our safety without doing much of anything. The deep water, though, requires our effort and attentiveness, and it can be exhausting.

Living out and speaking out the gospel truth to a materialist, secular society is non-conformist and scary. Calling out social elitism and speaking up for social outcasts carries the risk of being delegated to the ranks of the outcast.

Sacrificing our own personal comfort and stability to provide comfort and stability for the poor can be dangerous, and we might find ourselves fearful of joining them in their poverty.

Suggesting that our institutions should promote the *common* good of *all* people rather than protect and serve the interests of the few can really anger people!

Advocating for life, all the way from the womb to the tomb, is a recipe that's guaranteed to evoke fierce negative reaction by almost everyone at some point!

And living the Golden Rule, well, that's a whole other level of challenge.

I don't say any of this condescendingly, because all too often I find myself frolicking around in the splash pool, riddled with all those fears that keep me from jumping into the deep water. Is that ok? No. Is it human? Yes. Does Jesus understand? Yes. And all the while, just like my dad, he's standing in the deep, holding his arms out, begging me, begging all of us, "Don't be afraid, just jump in. I've got you."

A quick example of a life lived in the deep water: St. Teresa of Avila lived in the 16th century and is one of only thirty-eight people in all of history to be revered as a doctor of the church. But during much of her lifetime, Teresa was rejected, even in her own convent. She was a troublemaker, and when she started making noise that her order of nuns had become lax and lazy in their faith and suggesting major reforms, their response was swift and harsh. They threw her out—out of the convent that she herself had established.

She later recounted that she was ordered to leave in the middle of the night during a heavy storm. Still dressed in her all-wool habit, she climbed onto a donkey cart and was riding along when the wheel of the cart hit a large stone, overturning the cart and dumping her into the mud. There she lay, in mud-soaked wool, rejected, beaten down, and angry. She looked up to heaven and cried out, "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder that you don't have many!" Life would have been much easier for St. Teresa if she had stayed in the kiddie pool, but she chose to accept Jesus's invitation to swim in the deep waters with him.

Today, on this day that we celebrate fathers, I'm grateful for having a dad who encouraged me to move beyond the shallow pool; and if your father, or a father figure, pushed you to face your fears and experience life a little more fully, I hope you'll take the opportunity to say, "Thank you" today!

But whatever your relationship and history is with your earthly dad, always remember that your unconditionally loving God, your Father in heaven, your Father who's proven his trustworthiness over and over, stands in the deep end of the pool and invites us all: "Just jump in. Don't be scared, I've got you!"