

There was an advertising campaign in the 1970's for a financial advisor. Two individuals were having a quiet conversation about investing, when one remarks: "Well, my broker is E.F. Hutton, and E.F. Hutton says..." Then the camera would pan out, showing that everyone in the restaurant/on the airplane/on the golf course had stopped what they were doing to hear what E.F. Hutton had to say. It is as if they were eavesdropping.

It was clever, implying that if a person of great wisdom were speaking, people immediately would fall into line and listen. It is also a phenomenon known as the cocktail-party effect. You probably have all experienced this, when you are in a crowded room and there is ambient noise all around. And yet, suddenly you hear your name spoken and immediately turn your head. Why is that?

In large part, because your brain has its own will, specifically your auditory cortex. It is trained to recognize certain words, in this case, your own name, whereas other sounds get all jumbled together.

In today's first reading, Jeremiah remarks that he heard the whispers all around him. We know nothing of the circumstances, but quite likely he too heard his name and realized it was being spoken of in a disparaging way. He also speaks of the loss of friendship due to his message. This too is very real today. Clear demarcation lines are being drawn in a host of areas. Increasingly, people of faith feel as though their choices are producing negative repercussions among friends and acquaintances.

We would be wise to heed the rest of the first reading from Jeremiah. The prophet says, "But the Lord is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph." We cannot fear what others say or think about us, if it is on account of the life of faith.

If you look to today's Gospel, Jesus tells the Twelve that they should fear no one. How is this possible? Could any of us say that we fear no one? There is a little discussed vice called the *sin of human respect* and it is worth discussing. Even its name is confusing, as we think of respect as always being a good. It is, but not if human respect takes priority over God.

We are to fear no man in the sense that they cannot keep us from the grace of God and the love of Christ poured out into our hearts. But we **do fear** whether others respect us, and while understandable, it can become a sinful desire. The sin of human respect consists in fearing what other human beings think of us more than the Lord.

In St. Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation, the devil says: "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." Or in St. Mark's Gospel, we hear: "The Pharisees came to Jesus and said, 'Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone's opinion. You do not regard a person's status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.'" (Mark 12:14).

Jeremiah spoke difficult truths and for this he was scorned and spurned. People were waiting in the weeds for when he stumbled. We priests can become tired of teaching hard truths, fearing the angry e-mails will soon follow or someone may get up and walk out. Jeremiah for his part is hurt and filled with a vengeful spirit. He calls down God's wrath against his enemies, but he could have acted differently, and more virtuously.

The manner in which Jesus taught about forgiveness makes it harder to stand by Jeremiah's reaction, even if we sympathize with him. Jesus is teaching us an even better way than vengeance. We rightly judge the quality of actions, but for souls, that is for the Lord and him alone.

May we never fear the esteem of others to such an extent that we place our deeply held convictions on hold. May we have confidence in ourselves, and trust that the Lord will support us and give us our needed strength.