

Jeremiah 20: 7-13; Matthew 10: 24-39

“Anchored in the Deep”

As we open our ears and hearts to the words from our Sacred Text, I'd like for us to remember the circumstances in which these words were written. And I invite you to notice how you respond to these words, in your body and in heart; how these passages make you feel. For, the worlds of Jeremiah, and of Jesus as told in Matthew, and ours are vastly different, but the Scripture brings together all of us who listen to God, who are attentive to what God is calling us to do, across time and cultures. And as different as our worlds are, what the Hebrew prophet experienced, and what Jesus and his disciples experienced, shine the light for us in our journey of faith.

First, Jeremiah. All the prophets of the House of Israel share this in common: It is typically a lonely, thankless job, of bringing's God's words of judgment and hope to a people who are generally not interested in hearing them. God has been in relationship with the people of Israel, but the relationship hasn't always been “equal.” God has given them the Law of Moses so they can live in the right relationship with God, but people have failed to live by them. People are constantly in need of being “redirected” from having gone astray, and that job of redirecting fell on the prophets.

Other prophets were given the job of conveying God's intention for God's people, but what makes Jeremiah special is it contains the prophet's confession, his grappling with his vocation, his suffering, and his complaints to God; yes, he gets mightily indignant. From him, we learn of the cost of being God's prophet. Now let us listen to his words. [Read the passage.]

I wonder what you heard in this passage. Did you hear the tension in his voice; how he was enticed or seduced into being God's prophet. “And look what you've done to me!” he says to God. He suffers humiliation and rejection by his own people because of what he does for God.

So, to save himself from this misery, from he decides, okay, I will quit delivering God's words.... Only to find out he can't. When he decides to give up his task, when he gives up doing what God meant him to do, that is to quit being God's prophet, his own body cries out. It is as if, he tries to save his life and instead loses it.

Then, did you notice the shift in Jeremiah's tone? Did you feel it when something shifted in Jeremiah's ranting? Without any change in the hostility and conflict from his own people, somehow Jeremiah recovers his trust that God will uphold him. Through it all, God will come

through for him. The world has turned on him, but he somehow accesses his conviction that through it all, God is on his side. The only way out, he learns, is not to succumb to the sneer of the people and turn away from his calling as a prophet, but rather to go deeper than the pain of humiliation and rejection by his own people, and deeper still to the loving intention of God that made him God's prophet. That for him, is to find life that God intended for him.

In this passage, Jeremiah expresses his commitment to God and God's deliverance of him in terms of the defeat of his enemy. About the ones who had maltreated him, Jeremiah says "they will not prevail; they will be shamed; they will be eternally dishonored, and he even asks God to let him see God's retribution upon them. That's Jeremiah's truth and we hear him; he maybe a God-chosen prophet but he's only human.

Yet, the even deeper truth is that God's love is the anchor for even those who are enemy to Jeremiah. After all, God sent Jeremiah to them so that they can change their ways and return to God, which is the meaning of repentance, so that they can know God's forgiveness and live in the light.

If this passage from Jeremiah is about the cost of being God's prophet, today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is about the cost of being Jesus' disciple. So, as you listen to it, keep in mind that it comes right after the passage where Jesus is giving his disciples a heads up on what to expect, as they go on their mission: Jesus has just told them he was sending them out like sheep into the midst of wolves, Jesus tells them, therefore, to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. They are warned that they'd be handed over to the authority and punished; their siblings would turn against them, and they will be hated by all because of what they do following their teacher Jesus. Let us listen. [Read the Matthew passage.]

How did that sound to you? Did any part resonate with you? Yeah, I know what that's like. Or did it all sound strange? How can following Jesus, being a Christian, create such division? Do you ever feel threatened, even a little, because of your faith in him?

It is a particular challenge for us who live in the Western world where Christianity has historically been the dominant religion, if not a state religion, to imagine that Jesus came to create social unrest, that Jesus came to upset the stable order in the human society, not only at the level of public life but also on the family level. And yet, that's what this Scripture tells us. What could Jesus mean by these anti-social sayings?

Before we dismiss these difficult sayings as something that only applied to the ancient society Jesus lived, let us reflect on some observation that seems to remain constant in any human society of any time, including ours.

Regardless of the truth of religious teaching, or the ideal of a political thought, when it gains the dominant, prevailing position in the society, we tend to pour our energy in holding onto that majority position and use that power to keep it. Because we seek safety, security and stability; all of which are not necessarily bad things; they are good. But before we know it, we become so focused on maintaining that order that we forget about the very teaching, the very ideal itself. Soon, we are busy keeping that power and order at the expense of the core value and the teaching itself.

That's what had happened the house of Israel, and God sent the prophets to bring them back to God, to remind them that the most important thing was to remain in the right relationship with God. In Jesus's time, too, that's what was happening. On the societal level, the peace of the Roman Empire in which they lived came with the price tag of the oppression of the minority peoples, like the Jews and other ethnic groups.

On the personal level, family was the critical foundational unit that provided safety, stability and security. But in your experience, is a family automatically a place of safety, security and stability? We may wish it were, but more often than that, a family is a complicated blessing at best. It is a gift and blessing to have a family that can provide those things, but when loyalty to the family becomes more important than being faithful to God, then the whole thing falls apart.

Jesus did not come up with these harsh words about the family breakdown, he was quoting another Hebrew prophet Micah who wrote: for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.

Jesus does not say "don't love your father or mother, or son or daughter, period," but "don't love them more than me." Even in other version of this teaching we read in the Bible, as in Luke's Gospel, where it says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," the "hate" actually means to "love less." Why, because it is Jesus who teaches us how to love, and even more, our ability to genuinely love at all comes from God who sent Jesus to us.

So, those things that seem to give us safety, security and stability, whether it is a society or the family unit, cannot be the ultimate, all reliable source of all that.

So, what is the ultimate truth that is the core value at the heart of Jesus's teaching. What can create true peace and maintain the right order in the society and keep us in the right relationship with God?

According to the Scripture, what drove Jesus in his ministry is his compassion. That "loving kindness" of God that kept God sending prophet after prophet to bring God's people back to God. Compassion for the vulnerable, the weak, the sick, and the sinners of all kinds. No one escapes God's compassion.

In every time and place, if we seek to follow the teaching of Jesus grounded in compassion, if we seek to remain faithful to God of compassion and treat everyone else with the same compassion, we are bound to create social conflict, because it requires us to let go of our power to control and maintain the "peace" ourselves. But there is no other place to start.

It is not the human family that guarantees us safety, security and stability. Rather, into this tricky web of intimate human relationship, we bring the same compassion and loving kindness with which we are held by God, so that the family can be the safe and secure place we wish it to be. That's what Loving Jesus More than family will do to the family. And the larger society is the same.

But the human will to do it our way, to keep the power we have over others and control them is strong. Our trust in ourselves, rather in the faithful love of God for us is strong. That's our will to "save our own life," but it is by yielding to God's way of compassion and loving kindness, that we find the fullness of life. In losing our life for the sake of God's compassion and love, we gain our life.

God knows exercising compassion in our world, in our modern society today, to make the loving mercy the law of the land, will be met with hostility that could even threaten our lives. But just as it was true in the time of Jeremiah, it is true in our time, that our only true hope, the only way forward in healing this world is to follow that way of love, through the hostile stare and rejection even by those whom we hold dear and follow it deeper and deeper down to the wellspring of God's own loving kindness and compassion and put our anchor there.

Jesus says, do not be afraid. You are anchored in the Deep of God.