

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 25, 2017
Third Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 20:1-13
Psalm 69:1-18
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 10:24-33

Just prior to our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus commissions the twelve apostles to go, to preach, to heal, to exorcise demons, to raise the dead, to minister and to carry on his work because the needs are so great and the workers are so few. And by extension, of course, his commission extends to the Church today.

Now one might conclude from this, as the first apostles likely did, that troubles and difficulty would now be a thing of the past. After all, Jesus gave them real authority to do some amazing stuff. And, the Holy Spirit has now come to empower the church in her witness to Christ. So it's all blue skies from here on out, right?

Alas, not so. One person who discovered this (albeit before Pentecost) was Jeremiah. His preaching landed him in a lot of trouble, all of which was very real.

Just prior to our text for today he was beaten and imprisoned (Jer. 20:1-6). On another occasion he was hauled to court on charges of blasphemy (Jer. 26). And a few chapters after our text today he is beaten and imprisoned again (Jer. 37:11-21). The end result is that Jeremiah's speaking on behalf of God often places him in situations where his very life is in danger.

Faced with this situation, Jeremiah abandons all courtesy and engages God in serious conversation. He says, “Lord, you persuaded me. You talked me into this whole thing. Now I am mocked by everyone in the city. Your messages have made me a household joke.

So you know what I’ve decided, Lord? I’ve decided to scrap this whole thing. I’m just going to keep my mouth shut. I’m not going to mention you anymore. I just won’t tell people what you have to say to them. I’ll just shut my yap, and then these yahoos won’t have old Jeremiah to kick around anymore!”

And at that point the Psalmist joins the conversation and says, “Right on, Jeremiah! You think *you* have it bad! Let me tell you what’s happening to me!

I’ve tried to serve the Lord faithfully. I’ve been zealous for his house, and I worship every time the doors are open. I fast and practice the spiritual disciplines. I’ve prayed and pleaded and sought God until I’m an emotional mess. I can’t stop crying, I’m not sleeping well, and I think I’m going over the edge.

And for what? I have more enemies than hairs on my head. People are lying about me and spreading malicious rumors. My own family won’t have anything to do with me. I am a joke, a laughingstock, in my community. They even sit around in the neighborhood bars and make up bar room songs about me! All because I’m trying to witness to the love of God.”

For Jeremiah and the Psalmist, it's all a bit overwhelming. They try to do the right thing, and they get kicked in the teeth. They try to fulfill God's call on their lives, and they find themselves afraid for their lives.

These Scripture lessons remind us today that **there will be times in your life where you will feel totally overwhelmed as you try to be faithful as a Christian.** Times where you will give it your best shot and still come out feeling like you are in the flood waters and about to go under. Times when you will meet opposition so intense that it will produce in you a deep and profound *fear*.

Whether it is Jeremiah, the Psalmist, the apostles, or sometimes us -- suffering and opposition is sometimes the direct result of our calling to bear witness to the Kingdom of God.

Well, what does Jesus have to say to all of this?

Just two things, I think: First, he says, **“Don't be surprised.”** Second, he says, **“Don't be afraid.”**

Don't be surprised when you meet resistance and opposition. Don't be surprised if people malign you and make fun of you and misrepresent you for being a Christian and speaking in his name. Don't be surprised when you don't win popularity contests for following after him.

Why? *Because the servant is not greater than the master.* And the student is not greater than the teacher. And the master and teacher was often treated like dirt, so don't expect your fate to be much different.

The second thing Jesus tells us is this. It is so important that he repeats it three times in this short passage. He says: **“Do not be afraid.”**

I hope I am wrong, but the day may come when following Jesus may mean for you that your very life may be threatened. The natural response to such a reality is *fear*.

Martin Luther King no doubt felt such fear. He confided it to his inner circle in the weeks prior to his death, and he makes subtle references to it in his speeches just days before he was assassinated. He told listeners in one speech that he might not get to the Promised Land with them, but that was OK, and he was not afraid.

And there are probably brothers and sisters right now in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan that are combating fear.

God forbid it should ever happen, but the day may come when you will stand before someone with the power to harm you or take your life as a result of your faith in Christ. In that moment, Jesus says, “Don't be afraid of those whose power is limited to the physical realm and to this world only. Instead, fear and honor God, whose power is ultimate and eternal.”

And in that moment, says Jesus, we are to remember something else: the God who numbers the hairs on your head and who counts the sparrows that fall to the ground holds you securely in the hollow of his hand and in the center of his will.

Carrying on Jesus' work and doing the things he did is definitely not easy, and it is most assuredly not always the *safe* way to go. But *true safety is not to be found in the absence of danger, but in the presence of God.* Armed with that knowledge, we carry on confidently the work Christ has given us to do, affirming with Martin Luther:

*And tho this world with devils filled, Should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us;
The prince of darkness grim -- we tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure --
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly powers, No thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours, Through him who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.