

Epworth Chapel on the Green
September 3, 2017
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:21-27

Today's Old Testament reading catches the prophet Jeremiah in a moment of weakness. He is a bit discouraged, and frankly, I don't blame him. Perhaps a bit of context will help us to see the picture here more clearly.

You remember that God called Jeremiah when he was very young to deliver a very unpopular message to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah. God tells Jeremiah, "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb, and before you were born I set you apart as my spokesman" (Jer. 1:5).

Jeremiah replies, "O Lord, I can't speak for you – I'm too young" (Jer. 1:6).

To which God replies: "Don't say that, and don't be afraid, for I will be with you and take care of you" (Jer. 1:8).

Part of the reason Jeremiah is hesitant here is not just that he is young. He is hesitant because he has been called to deliver a very unpopular message to people at a critical time in their history, and their response to the message is going to be entirely negative and even violent.

Jeremiah lived in Judah (the Southern Kingdom) for almost 40 years before the people were exiled and taken captive by the Babylonians because of their decades of disobedience to God. Jeremiah has the unpleasant task of telling the people that it is now too late to avoid God's discipline and punishment, so they must accept what is coming.

He uses vivid object lessons to convey this to the people. Perhaps the most vivid one that we may recall is when he goes to the potter's house, and takes the clay pot and shatters it as a way of showing how God is about to shatter Jerusalem.

As you can imagine, Jeremiah's message is not well received. He is locked up and imprisoned, and his life is threatened. Ultimately, the Babylonians invade, take the people captive, and utterly destroy the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants, including the Temple. Jeremiah writes about the destruction in the Old Testament book we know as Lamentations. His description of these events earned him the nickname "The Weeping Prophet." If you've ever read the Lamentations, you know why.

By any human measure of success, Jeremiah was a colossal failure. For most of his life he was poor, unpopular, isolated, and persecuted. So we *can* and *should* forgive him when we encounter him in our text for today and he is experiencing a bit of a "down" moment. His preaching has brought him derision

and reproach, and left him feeling alone and isolated. He is suffering – mentally and physically – as he tries to live in obedience to God’s call on his life.

What Jeremiah learns *implicitly* is stated for us *explicitly* by Jesus in our Gospel lesson. **To follow Jesus is to take up a cross.** *To follow Jesus is to deny yourself – your priorities, your preferences, and your comforts. To follow Jesus is to be willing to give it all up – even your very life – for the sake of his Gospel.*

I’ve thought about this a lot this week. And I’ve thought about Paul’s words to the Romans. I confess that when I’ve read Paul’s words here I’ve mostly read them in a metaphorical sense. “Present your bodies as living sacrifices,” he says. And I’ve always read those words to mean that I need to give Christ first priority in my life and in every area of my life.

But Paul is calling to mind the sacrifices of the Old Testament. And I think that part of what he is saying here to the Romans is that we are called *to join ourselves to the passion of Christ*. For by his Cross, Jesus has shown us what Israel’s sacrifices were meant to teach, namely, *that we owe to God all that we are and all that we have*. We are called to offer our *whole lives* as a sacrifice to God. For Paul, the only rational and reasonable response we can give to a God who has given us everything is to give our lives to the service of His will.

In our Gospel lesson today, Peter does not yet understand this. As it was for Jeremiah, the Cross is a stumbling block for Peter. Peter faces a temptation that all

of us face, namely, we do not accept that our *sufferings* and *hardships* play a necessary part in God's plan for us.

That may be how we are tempted to think and to live. But both Paul and Jesus tell us today that we are called to the renewal of our minds. And the renewing of our minds means learning to *think* as God thinks, and learning to *will* what God wills.

How does that happen?

May I suggest to you that it starts here, with our corporate worship? Every time you walk through the doors of this sanctuary, your attitude and mindset should be: *Lord Jesus, here I am. I offer myself to you completely. I am a living sacrifice. I acknowledge that Your will, not mine, should be done, especially when that is hard for me to do. I surrender to you every part of my life. Help me to see with your eyes. Change how I think. Renovate my life completely, both inside and out. Deliver me from the culture of death and its values. Liberate me for your service. Help me to count the cost, and to pay it gladly.*

This is a dangerous and subversive mindset. But both Paul and Jesus are right. In view of God's mercies to us, it is the only logical and reasonable response we can make.

As you come to the Lord's Table, may your coming be a bodily prayer. May it be a form of complete surrender to Jesus, even if you don't fully understand all

of the details. And may the grace you receive be sufficient to keep you and sustain you, no matter what His will may be for your life.

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