

The 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland June 22, 2014
On Jeremiah 20: 7-13 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

For me, Jeremiah is the most human of all the Prophets of the Old Testament. As you read through the pages of his book it becomes obvious that he was deeply conflicted about being a prophet. And he didn't bury those conflicts, he put them right out there for everyone to see.

On the one hand, Jeremiah was clearly a man of peace, obviously affectionate and gentle, but on the other he always seemed to be at war - with his own people, with kings, priests, false prophets, the nation itself - and he said that he needed to be so, because he firmly believed he'd been called to "tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow" (1:10).

You can see how that might cause some inner conflict! And it's obvious he was tortured by an inner duty he couldn't refuse. The very next verse after the end of today's Old Testament reading is this: "a curse on the day that I was born!"

It's clear from what Jeremiah wrote that this sort of anguish and suffering had a purifying effect for him of everything unworthy; it made him open to God. I think it was this openness that allowed him to do what he believed he was called to do and say what he believed he was called to say.

His faith wasn't superficial, it was deep, profound, heartfelt. He sounds like a combination of Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther: "Here I stand. I can do no other. May God have mercy on my soul!"

What this profound faith did was allow him to be open to the possibility that God was teaching a new thing, and the consequence was that he re-thought the teaching of his age: God examines the heart (11:20), God rewards each according to their works (31:29-30), true religion is friendship with God (2:2) but that friendship is broken by sin. And sin isn't something "original" - it's a perversion of our wills, a choice that involves turning away from our intrinsic, created goodness. At the center of it all, Jeremiah said, was this: love.

Despite his own fears, and his posture of love, Jeremiah was fearless when it came to confronting what he saw as evil, and that included the way that the nation's leaders exploited its citizens, the way that justice was perverted, the way that faith was marginalized, the way that ends always seemed to justify means and might made right.

Jeremiah is the prophet who first talked about a new covenant written in the heart.

Today's reading is one of those autobiographical passages that reads more like a confession than anything, where Jeremiah talked about the way he was being treated by his fellow Israelites because of what he was saying to them, and how, in the end, he was sure that God would deliver not him but the the needy. That sort of selflessness is striking, isn't it?!

And you can see some linkage with what Paul was writing to the Romans. Baptism into Jesus'

death sounds a lot like Jeremiah's recognition that the way of faith isn't easy, in fact it's really quite hard if we live it with real integrity and authenticity. But such a way of living is also transformational - we will be different people on the other side.

Today's gospel also sounds a bit "Jeremiah-ish" - the voice of a prophet talking about internal division within families - as much, I suspect, as Jesus was also thinking about conflict within local and national groups, much as Jeremiah was.

Behind all these stories is one simple fact: becoming a person of faith changes you in ways that others find difficult or threatening.

And "those who find it difficult or threatening" include our blood relatives - the ones who know us best are in the best place to notice.

One problem we face is internal - the way that some Christian communities represent God as angry and vengeful, calling us to repentance through fear and intimidation. Yes, there's some of that in the bible, but that's not the theme that's central which is all about love, compassion, justice, and transformation. And it isn't the God we meet in Jeremiah or in Jesus, neither of whom sought to convert through fear or intimidation, but by proclaiming by word and example the loving grace and forgiveness of God through a new covenant written in the heart not on cold stone.

True faith is about lives transformed, about hard work and difficult relationships, about challenge and joy - about real life in all its richness, in other words.

That vision of faith comes with an invitation. How are our lives different through being Christians - what's changed for us that would be obvious to others in response to God's love and grace?

.