

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7. June 25, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Jeremiah does sound a little bit like an “Eeyore” doesn't he?!! A pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, unhappy, glass-half-empty, ‘woe is me’ person. The truth is, though, that he had every reason to sound that way: he lived in dangerous times, was all-to-aware of the sorts of unpleasant things that happened to prophets, and suffered just such an “unpleasant thing” himself.

Prophets aren't in the business of gazing into crystal balls and, as a result of that, foretelling the future. Prophets were – and are – individuals how have the clarity to project potential outcomes and the strength to point out those outcomes to those responsible for them. I say “strength” because the sorts of outcomes they so often have talked about are the ones most of the people they tell don't want to hear.

A mundane example was a phrase my mother used to use: “If you keep doing that then someone will get hurt!” Actually, I'll bet my mother wasn't the only parent to have used that phrase! She wasn't describing the potential consequences by using some prescient gift she had; rather, she was basing what she said on experience and knowledge – she not only recognized the pattern but applied it to what she said..

But that, alone, didn't and doesn't make a prophet! There are at least two other components in the prophetic identity. First, Jeremiah was compelled to speak - this is broadly true of all prophets; and, second, genuine prophesy always involves personal risk. That, of course, is often the consequence of telling powerful people things they don't want to hear, or perhaps more significantly, challenging powerful people to change their behavior in ways that would benefit others, but not them. When you combine that with the sort of language that suggests your hearer's behavior might cause them to come to some eternal harm, you have a lethal mixture! Jeremiah is an example of that pattern: he ultimately came to a grisly end as a result of his prophetic endeavors.

How could it be so offensive? When a prophet began a diatribe with “Woe to you” he was quoting from the Israelite funeral service. That was tantamount to saying “You're as good as dead!” You can see why the targets might be a little miffed!

That helps explain why, for instance, the Prophet Amos described himself as a sheep herder and a sycamore fig farmer, when the quality of his writing suggests a person with significant social standing – perhaps a member of the king's court. Better to mask your identity than lose your head (literally!), his logic clearly went.

I want to give you two examples of the power of some of these prophetic statements: one from Amos and the other a contemporary one. Amos issues a stark warning to those who “lie on beds of ivory” – “alas” for them, he says (Amos 6:4), because their end is near. Ivory was a luxury import from Africa - elephants weren't indigenous to Israel - and no one was harvesting ivory from sea animals like whales. Importing ivory meant trade, and to trade meant you possessed goods that could be traded AND that were portable. In the case of Israel, the two primary trade

goods were oil from olive trees, and wine from grapes. To produce both required land, and to get that land the Israelite elites engaged in a practice still familiar to us – they sold seed to farmers at high prices, and, when the harvest came in, they bought the produce at rock bottom prices. When the farmers couldn't afford to buy more seed because of its high cost the wealthy would loan them money to buy seed. When, inevitably, the farmers couldn't afford to repay the loan, they were foreclosed on. Eventually much of the land in Israel was owned and controlled by wealthy elites, who ripped up the subsistence crops planted by former owners – the peasant farmers – and planted vines and olive trees. More and more of the population became dependent on only one crop - wheat - and no longer were able to rotate their crops. Inevitably, crops would fail, famine would follow, and the people would starve. But not the wealthy – who continued their luxurious lifestyle - epitomized by the expensive imports Amos mentioned – like ivory. Ivory came to symbolize these exploitative, wealthy elites. Alas – “Woe” unto them! They were as good as dead! It's not difficult to see that “them's fighting words!”

The second example comes from a contemporary prophetic utterance, written in 2009 in the face of the financial collapse of that year. It also begins with the words opening a funeral service – this time from the Book of Common Prayer:

***I am resurrection and light, says the Lord, but you don't want to see the light let alone live in it – you who devised credit default swaps at parties, who conspired over sub-prime mortgage loans. For you lined your pockets while the people's houses were foreclosed upon, you laughed while they lost their retirement savings. You spent your time feasting at expensive restaurants and being chauffeured around in limousines while the people were forced to go to food banks and walk to the unemployment offices. You get drunk with power and use it to exploit women whose gender and social standing deny them access to your old boy's network.***

Benign, don't you think? Not! John the Baptist's equally “benign” comment about some of those coming out to be baptized by him comes to mind: “you brood of vipers!”

I've taken the time to talk about prophets and prophesy because one of the things Jesus calls us to in today's gospel is about speaking truth. It's not only about speaking truth to power - which is the most obvious characteristic of the Old Testament prophets of Jeremiah's day – it's about speaking truth to everyone. That's what Jeremiah feared – the consequences of speaking truth. That's what Jesus cautions about in today's gospel – the consequences of speaking truth.

It's important to recognize for all of us that there's a difference between speaking the truth “with love” – which is the biblical standard – and speaking the truth out of our ego needs. The first – “with love” requires self-awareness and humility. The second cannot be heard by others in any valuable way.

At the heart of what Jesus says is that its not possible to speak truth unless we're willing to let go of the false truths sold to us by our contemporary culture – that's what the language of losing

your life is about: a dying to the myths we've been sold that have created that self ; a dying to self, to the habits of individualism, of greed, of self-interest – all those things we know in our hearts to be destructive not only of the human person but also of human community – a dying that takes us beyond the anxieties of the moment to rest safely in God..

What replaces them – the life that we find – is a refreshing freedom from the narrow constraints of contemporary consumerist existence, the ability to act compassionately toward others, and the humility to speak truth without ego, and without fear of the consequences.

This is a spiritual journey. It offers the possibility of rebirth into a community unwilling to be bound by old strictures and structures but which is, instead, open the possibilities birthed by God's divine graciousness.

It is, in the end, its only in being willing to let go of the life we thought was ours that we can find the life promised by God. It will birth in us a willingness to speak truth, to be prophets who proclaim the gracious gifts of God in Jesus, and who embrace the exciting exploration of human possibility, human goodness, and human grace that lie at the heart of the Christian endeavor.