

Sermon: August 21, 2016 – Jeremiah 1: 4-10
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today we meet Jeremiah, a prophet whose life was a living metaphor of his words. The writings of Jeremiah will be showing up regularly over the next few Sundays so we can get to know him somewhat gradually which is a good thing, for there is a depth here that can't really be honoured with a one-time meet-and-greet this morning.

We start at the beginning, with Jeremiah telling us of his call to ministry. And what a call it was! We don't know exactly how old he was – the general consensus seems to be that he was perhaps 17 or 18 - when God called him to a life of service. As is almost always the case, the first response to a calling is to find reasons to deny that you could possibly fulfill it, especially when you're feeling inexperienced or ill-prepared, so when God approached the young man with this new claim on his life it went like this:

I [Jeremiah] said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jeremiah 1: 6-9)

Imagine being 17 or 18, maybe even younger, and having this sense of purpose and divine partnership: such a beautiful melding of the enthusiasm of youth and the wisdom of the ages. My first thought is how nostalgic this would have been for Jeremiah, looking back on these early days, recalling his days as an eager, bright-eyed novice, ready for whatever the world would throw his way.



But there's another picture to consider, and it's this one: here we have Michelangelo's image of Jeremiah, as seen in the Sistine chapel. This Jeremiah is world-weary, pensive, even regretful. This Jeremiah is not looking back on his career with nostalgia, the taste on his lips is not sweet or even bittersweet. This Jeremiah looks back on his calling as a young man, not with a sense of joy at what a great ride it's been, but with regret or even resentment, as if to say "God took my whole life - and what is there to show for it?"

Michelangelo wasn't just imagining things when he portrayed Jeremiah in this way. Jeremiah is widely known as "the weeping prophet" and for good reason. Professor Gary Yates speaks of how deeply Jeremiah feels the pain of his surroundings: he embodies the tears of a God who is just heartbroken over the people's faithlessness, he cries the tears of his people as they suffer humiliating defeats at the hands of other nations, and he cries his own tears of anguish and anger - at how ill-treated he is by his own people, and how abandoned he feels by God. Even at the moment he is called to be a prophet we get a sense that this is not going to be an easy road for Jeremiah, for after God says to him, "**Now I have put my words in your mouth**" God gives him the details: "**See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.**" (Jeremiah 1: 9-10). That is not exactly a snippet from "How to make friends and influence people." God promises Jeremiah that it's not going to be easy, and God wasn't kidding.

As I said earlier, we'll be learning more of the specifics about Jeremiah in coming weeks so today let's stay with the emotions more than the details. I think it's safe to say that most of us wish that being committed to Jeremiah's God – the God whom we experience so directly through the words and life and life beyond life of Jesus Christ – was all light and joyous. If we were to prepare the glossy brochure to promote Christian living, and then live only that sunny side of life, it would be filled with wholeness, peace and joy, release from suffering and harmony with all our surroundings. And indeed, all those things are expressions of God's holy love, all of them come to us abundantly in Christ. We do correctly trust that there are benefits to being on this path of divine love.

The reality, though, is that the more we really participate in Christian discipleship, the more we, like Jeremiah and like Jesus, will feel the weight of the world. Both of them were so immersed in God's love for the world, both lives were lived amidst the suffering and redemption of the human condition. Jeremiah walked the walk, he didn't just talk the talk; and in that depth of fidelity – and the anguish it caused him – he witnessed to the same God who was later embodied in Jesus Christ. The call to Jeremiah, to witness to God's truth regardless of the cost, is continuous with our call to be followers of Jesus Christ, whose love is both powerful and costly. //

Six weeks ago, a desire to see some Major League Baseball led me to Houston, Texas. And while the baseball was good, the highlight of the trip was Sunday worship at Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church. That name may or may not flag something for you, but it relates to the rainbow flag we have hanging in our sanctuary.

Metropolitan Community Churches describe themselves as “a global movement of spiritually and sexually diverse people who are fully awake to God's enduring love. Following the example of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, we seek to build...church communities that demand, proclaim, and do justice in the world”. While primarily a Christ-centred Church of and for the LGBTQ community, they provide safe space for anyone who is judged on the basis of who they love. In the Houston congregation, for example, there are many heterosexual mixed-race couples, who have been shunned by other supposedly Christian friends who disapprove of their choice of spouse, but warmly welcomed by the Christ-followers at Resurrection MCC.

The Sunday I worshipped with them was only three days after the shooting of five police officers in Dallas, 240 miles from where we were worshipping; within the same week of police-involved killings in Baton Rouge and metropolitan Minneapolis; and it was a month after forty-nine people were killed at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando. So as Rev. Vickey Gibbs stepped into the pulpit on July 10th, it was somewhat of a “Jeremiah” moment, as the tears of grief and despair of her LGBTQ community, the tears of a loving God whose heart breaks each time violence is unleashed, and her own tears as a woman of colour, were intermingled. In her 22-minute masterpiece of a sermon she spoke eloquently and passionately about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and not just a fan of Jesus. It has been my privilege to remain in correspondence with Rev. Vickey and she has graciously given permission for me to share extensively from her sermon today:

You know, it's easy to hate. Especially the other. No matter what that “other” is – black vs white, or peace officer vs civilian, or Muslim vs Christian, or same-gender loving vs heterosexual, or Sunni vs Shi'a, or immigrant vs citizen [or] Democrat vs Republican. We're taught to fear and hate early in our lives; while we are still learning that “Jesus loves the little children of the world” we also learn, “well, not EVERY little child. Just the ones who look like us, who think like us, who come from where we come from, who believe like us.” But that's not what we're called to be as FOLLOWERS of Christ.

In John 13, Jesus says, **“Now I give you a new command: love one another. Like I have loved you, that is the way you must love one another. IF you have love for**

all of God's creation, then everyone will know that you are my disciples, my followers."

Sometimes, being a follower of Jesus...interferes with our life. Sometimes, I want to be a FAN of Jesus, not a FOLLOWER; 'cuz if I'm a FAN I can stand close enough to Jesus to get all the benefits, but not so close as that it will require me to do anything. Being a follower, COSTS. We followers are called into creating relationships across all of the artificial boundaries that we set up amongst ourselves. That, is true freedom: LOVE.

And then Vickey told us this story of costly love:

On June 18th, I came to set up the candle-scape [at the front of the sanctuary] representing the 49 lives taken in Orlando [shot by a man named Omar]. I struggled with placing only 49 candles... and I sat, pretty much where you're sitting, and I cried. I cried for each of the 49 victims and their families and friends whose lives had been forever changed. And as I sat and cried, I found myself holding a deeper sorrow for Omar's family and friends. You see, they were grieving too, because they had lost a son, and a husband, and a father, and a friend, and a co-worker, yet there was no one who was publicly offering a word of comfort or grace to them. Their lives, too, had been forever changed; they would forever be the son of, or the spouse of, or the parents of "that guy," who took the lives of so many people. No one was lighting a candle for their loss. And it was rending my heart, because I try my best to be a FOLLOWER, not a fan.

I knew I had to pray for them, and yet I also knew I needed to honour the pain that was present in this room, for those of us who were grieving from the destruction of the sanctuary of The Pulse, and who were remembering the first anniversary of Mother Emmanuel's in Charleston. So I lit a candle, *in my office*, for Omar and his family. I don't know what caused him to hate himself and others so much that he had to take their lives, but I don't need to have to know, if I'm a FOLLOWER. Lighting that candle, and offering that prayer, freed my spirit.

Before moving on, I need to tell you of two things that happened in worship after the sermon. One, is that Rev. Vickey mentioned that she had continued lighting that 50th candle in her office, as a reminder of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and as soon as she said that her Ministry team-mate, Rev. Troy, went and got the candle, and brought it to the communion table. The second thing that happened was that there was a police officer in worship, in uniform, in the front row, with her wife and family, and the embrace between her and her family and Rev. Vickey was a long-lasting holy moment I will never forget.

Jeremiah, in recalling his early days in Ministry, reminds us that the words God gives us and the tasks God gives us will sometimes be really hard. I can scarcely imagine how hard it was for Rev. Vickey to offer words and actions forgiving the Orlando shooter, in a congregation filled with people who live life feeling that there is a target on their backs. But experiencing her faithful courage underlined for me the truth of what Jeremiah challenges us to do and be.

In the midst of all this hard news – as we perhaps start to view life in the same world-weary way as Michelangelo's Jeremiah – there are at least three pieces of good news to be shared today.

The first piece of good news is the incomparable gift that comes when you know that your actions have made the light of Christ burn a little brighter in someone's life. That always comes with a cost of some sort – as simple as the time it took or perhaps some financial sacrifice, or as difficult as losing friends or enduring public ridicule for befriending the friendless – but there is something deep and pure about doing the right thing, even when it's the hardest thing to do.

The second piece of good news, is the presence of inspiring Ministries happening all around the world at this very moment, at places like Resurrection MCC in Houston. Their blessed and

costly engagement of their social settings encourages and inspires us when we face challenges in our Ministry and wonder if we're up to some steep climbing.

The third piece of good news relates to the second, and it's this: Jesus Christ calls all of us, together, to be His body in the world. Unlike the lone-wolf ministry of Jeremiah, which for much of his life really did amount to Jeremiah versus everyone else in the nation, it is US as a congregation and denomination, not just ME as an individual, that is called to be faithful followers and not casual fans of Christ and his radically-inclusive love. It is our calling, together, to lend a hand or raise a voice when injustice is seen. It is our calling, together, to offer heart-felt welcome to those who might wonder if anyone, let alone a Church, would care about their life. One of the things I celebrate most about this congregation is the sense that individuals know they can bring forward the things they feel called to do, and ask the group, "is this something we could all do together"? Rather than feeling isolated and out-numbered, there is strength in being part of a community that, as one body, seeks discipleship with Jesus Christ.

As we continuously learn to be followers of Jesus, as we keep learning what it means to engage in costly love, even to the point of praying for those who love to hate, we will find ourselves experiencing God's holy love more richly and fully. Sometimes that love will feel warm and rewarding, other times it will have us looking heavenward with bewilderment at how hard it is, but however it unfolds, when we truly give ourselves over to love, we truly give ourselves over to God. And with that, I close with the same confident words that Rev. Vickey closed her sermon with last month: "Love is Love is Love is Love...and it will always win. Thanks be to God, Amen."

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