

We Draw A Circle (A Sermon for Proper 7A)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Matthew 10:24-39

June 25, 2017

Today's lessons don't immediately scream love and peace and comfort, do they? They run counter to the way we typically think...the way I typically think...that if we choose to live in accordance with God's will, then everything will be alright.

You will live in peace and quiet and that nothing bad will happen to you because you are being good. Today's lessons provide the Biblical answer to that "Pollyanna-ish" way of thinking.

You may recall that when God called Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah tried to avoid the call. He said he was too young, but God reassured him that God would be with him and that God would give Jeremiah the words to speak.

Be careful what you wish for, right? Unfortunately for Jeremiah, the words that God gave him were harsh words. He was called to preach repentance, to challenge the nation to turn back to the way of faithfulness to the Lord their God. To turn back or to face doom at the hands of the revived Babylonian empire. And so Jeremiah preached this hard word of the Lord.

And he paid a high price for his faithfulness. He was accused of treason and blasphemy. He was imprisoned. He was the object of an assassination attempt. He was ostracized by the nation, by his fellow priests and by his family. He was ridiculed and scorned. And at times he fell prey to the dark forces of despair and hopelessness.

We can imagine the profound discouragement Jeremiah felt in the face of the stubborn and aggressive opposition of his enemies. We can imagine what a temptation it must have been for him to throw in the towel, to call it quits, to simply abandon the mission and forsake the cause. We can imagine he wanted to give up and go after those who were against him.

Then we follow that up with our Gospel for today, where Jesus also has some pretty harsh words for his disciples, and for us:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:34-37)

Read on one level, Jeremiah and Jesus could both be seen to be setting up an “us” vs. “them” mentality. There are those with us, and there are those against us.

But I don’t think that’s what these readings are getting at. I think one of the things we’re supposed to learn, from both Jeremiah and Jesus, is that following God means treating all people with love, even those who it is difficult to love.

What Jeremiah’s isolation, and Jesus’ teaching, tell me is that as followers of The Way, we are mandated – no option here, this is not a suggestion – to stand apart from the comfort and safety of huddling inside a group of like-minded people. We can’t stay over here with an “us” and watch out for “them” over there. We are to step away from that lifestyle and engage the life that Jesus desires for us. The life that Jesus demands of us.

A life that eliminates “us” and “them.” When it comes to living in the Kingdom of God, there is no “us” and “them.” When it comes to the Body of Christ, there is no “you” and “me.” There is “we.”

WE are to stand apart from the hatred and division of the world. **WE** are to take a step back from the tribalism and finger-pointing. **WE** are to take seriously the command to love one another. To love everyone, even those we think are our enemies.

No amount of church-going and outreach hours can atone for our not doing so.

And **WE** are to pray. We are to pray for and love those we know and care about, and we are to pray and love the hard-to-love.

Because true reconciliation – between prophet and nation, between parent and child, between relatives, between friends, between enemies, between political parties – can only come through the love of God that **we** share with the world.

Last week Rev. Beth led us in a prayer practice, where we started by praying for those we love, then those we know a little bit, and then finally for those we don't like. I hope you've been doing that this week, and if not I encourage you to start today.

This prayer practice brought to mind a poem I saw quoted in a book one time. Some of you may recognize this short poem by Edwin Markham that I think is worth hearing again this morning:

*He drew a circle that shut me out.
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Too often I think the world wants to draw circles that shut people out. I have to make sure that you believe like me before I let you in. I have to make sure you do the right things before I let you in.

But Jeremiah didn't do that. Jesus didn't do that.

**The world tries to draw a circle that shuts us out.
Calling us heretics, rebels, and things to flout.
But love and I - But Jesus and we - have the wit to win:
We draw a circle that takes the whole world in.**

Amen.