

Sermon, Proper 17C 2016

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Psalms 81:1, 10-16

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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As we listened to the prophet Jeremiah and the psalmist this morning, we might have thought they were writing of our present circumstances. Violence and terror seem to be our constant companions. We are confronted daily by horrific images. Such as those last Sunday associated with the devastating impact of a child bomber at a wedding party in Turkey. Or the attack on American University in Kabul, Afghanistan. God must be weeping. Or devastating natural disasters such as the destruction caused by the earthquake in Italy. Or the staggering flooding in Louisiana. All these images create a feeling of despair and we wonder where we are to turn?

Yet, the psalmist reports that God wants us back, is calling us to return. Psalm 81:13, "Oh, that my people would listen to me! That Israel would walk in my ways!" God in our lessons (the OT and Psalm) is calling us back. To return and God will show his love once again.

But what are those ways that we are called to walk in? That seems to be part of the difficulty. Different religious groups have vastly different understandings and interpretations. Some create horrifying violence in the name of God. Others exclude large groups of people hoping to establish a pure and deserving flock. As fundamentalist groups remind us over and over, once you start down the road toward purity with the shaming that accompanies such a pathway, there is no stopping point. You simply can't get pure enough.

But as I reflect upon our lessons this morning, I don't get a sense that God's desire is for a smaller group of purified followers. That doesn't seem to be the point of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. The letter calls us to let mutual

love continue. Show hospitality to strangers. This is not a narrowing of our focus but a risky broadening of perspective. At the very time that we want to control our interactions and limit our vulnerability, we encounter these readings which encourage us to do just the opposite. To say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” It is not easy but I sense scripture calling us to turn the other cheek, to allow ourselves to continue to be vulnerable. To continue to love, in spite of everything that suggests otherwise. Instead, we are called to reach out and be open.

Jesus is calling us to be open as well. Jesus had been invited to a meal at the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath. Yet, the Pharisees were watching as they have been doing for some time. On the Sabbath, they would be sure to watch. Yet, Jesus was watching as well. He was upsetting their understanding of Sabbath observance. He had done this by healing on the Sabbath on multiple occasions. Compassion and care take precedence over observance of the law.

Observing people gathering for the meal, Jesus offered commentary on how they chose their seating. But he didn’t stop there. He started to meddle when he spoke of invitation. Jesus directed them to broaden their sense of inclusion, extending the invitation to everyone, not just those we are most comfortable with. Jesus speaks of the banquet as not only including friends etc. Not limiting but enlarging, including also the lame, blind, poor, and crippled. Those who wouldn’t come to our minds right off.

Last Monday was the first day of Day School. What a joy-filled scene as the children and their parents arrived. I watched a mother who had not had children in the Day School for several years returned. She was welcomed by many other parents. After dropping off her youngest child, several mothers engaged her in conversation. This was a visible example of welcome.

I cannot preach the many stories that I have experienced at St. John’s. But I can share the stories from other churches. So I want to share my experience in my prior parish that I think illustrates some of the points that Jesus spoke of when he discussed invitation.

Peter was a tall, good looking, brilliant internist. His brother was a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic. But Peter had chosen a small town in Kentucky to set up practice. To live there and raise a family with the woman of his dreams, Liz. He was very successful and almost everyone that I knew in town had been his patient. He was beloved. Yet, he developed a neurological condition that affected his ability to walk and get around. It did not impact his intellect but most importantly it affected his speech. As his disease progressed his speech became increasingly difficult to understand. He had been able to continue to practice medicine for a time with his wife in the exam room with him providing translation for the patients. Liz accompanied Peter into the exam rooms and would translate what Peter was trying to articulate to his patients. But with time as his illness progressed he finally had to give up his practice.

But when I arrived Peter could no longer practice medicine or walk. He was essentially home bound, wheelchair bound. The effects of Peter's disease meant that Peter was difficult to be around. He was very difficult to understand or thus difficult to converse with. It took significant concentration to understand him. Conversations were difficult and short.

But Peter had been a vital part of the social network of my parish. His friends simply would not let Peter slip away from them. Peter had some very good friends, most were Episcopalians, but all were completely dedicated to Peter. One was Joe, an orthopedic surgeon. As an orthopedist, Joe was concerned with mobility. So, Joe had two boards, long 2x6's, that he carried in his truck/car. When there was to be a dinner or party, Joe arrived ahead of time and positioned the two long boards up the front steps. This was Joe's portable handicap ramp. With this awkward creation, suddenly all homes were accessible to Peter. Using the portable ramp, they wheeled him into the party or dinner. Once there Peter was not neglected. They were patient with Peter and engaged him in conversation. It was amazing to me because conversation was slow and difficult.

Peter had another friend, Ben. Ben was both a farmer as well as the owner of the local liquor stores. Ben was not a church goer. Yet, I got to know and love

Ben. Ben was devoted to Peter. They had a long standing tradition of going out to eat every Thursday evening. Ben would drive his red truck to Peter's. Lift Peter into the cab of his truck. Lift his wheelchair into the back. Off they went to a local restaurant. I had the pleasure of eating with them once watching the commitment they had to one another. Ben assured me I wouldn't catch him in church. Yet, every year he visited my office in Advent. He would sit and chat for a while and then as he rose to leave he would hand me a check for my discretionary fund. With the admonition that this was to assist those in need in the community.

I watched as his friends loved Peter right up until he died. They loved him dearly and he loved them in return. He was ill with extremely limited mobility, and unable to talk. But that didn't mean he was not to be included. Included he was, right up to the end. It was a powerful example of never letting go of those we love. Of showing that love demands a lot from us, and yet we are capable of responding. They showed me what it means to welcome the crippled and lame, those who could easily be outcast.

The world is a pretty sticky place these days. In the midst of all our difficulties, Jesus has more demands. Calls us forth in love to reach out to one another. At the very time when we feel most afraid and reluctant, Jesus calls us forth. If we are attentive as we go through our days, opportunities will present themselves. Opportunities for us to reach out and touch somebody's hand and as the song says, "Make this world a better place if you can." Reach out and touch. Reach out and include. This is not an easy task especially during this point in time, we have good reason to be anxious. But it is at this precise time that we need to draw upon the courageous love that Jesus extends to us. And in turn extend that love to others.

It is counterintuitive for sure. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews encourages us, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." (Heb. 13:1). "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." (Hebrews 13:16). (use as offertory sentence as well.)

Today, I will let the Episcopal radio personality, Garrison Keillor, have the last word. This quote from 8/20/2016 thanks to a parishioner from a column appearing in the Richmond Times Dispatch. "Style is not what keeps us going. We survive by virtue of people extending themselves, welcoming the young, showing sympathy for the suffering, taking pleasure in one another's good fortune. We are here for a brief time. We would like our stay to mean something. Do the right thing. Travel light. Be sweet."