

HARD WORDS FOR HARD TIMES

Jeremiah 20:7-13

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Matthew 10:24-29

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TEXT: Matthew 10:34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

PURPOSE: To call us to faithfulness to God’s claim on our lives as followers of Jesus, especially when especially when doing what God wants us to do risks scorn or sacrifice or persecution.

How would you like it if God recruited you to speak God’s message, but the message God gave you would result in you being denounced by those to whom you were sent, and abandoned by your family and closest friends? That was the experience of the prophet Jeremiah, whose prophetic ministry spanned the years before and immediately following Babylon’s defeat of Judah. God called Jeremiah to proclaim a terrible message: God has had it with God’s people. It’s too late to repent. This nation is going to suffer because of its disregard for God’s ways, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.

The message was troubling enough, but that wasn’t the whole story. God told Jeremiah that he couldn’t marry or father children. (16:2) He wasn’t allowed to pray for the conversion of his people. (11:14) He wasn’t allowed to mourn with mourners or participate in celebrations. (16:5) He faced stiff opposition from the people of his home town, who threatened to kill him if he didn’t stop speaking those hard words. (11:21) Let’s just say God was not offering an attractive employee benefits package.

Jeremiah often let God know how miserable his ministry was making him. A number of his complaints are included in his book. In today’s passage, he says, “You enticed me, God, you overpowered me.” In other words, God tricked him into the prophetic ministry, and he had no choice but to accept the call. But speaking God’s word really messed him up. He told God that, “The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.” (20:8) It got so bad that he tried to stop saying what God gave him to say. “But,” he said, “if I shut up and stop speaking for God, the words burn in my bones. And holding the words inside me is exhausting.” (20:9) Another one of Jeremiah’s complaints is followed by a response from God, in which God basically says, “quit complaining and get back to work.” (15:9) No sympathy, no appreciation for what his life was like because of being God’s spokesperson. No wonder later readers called Jeremiah “the prophet of doom.” His words, God’s words, were hard words for a hard time.

There were plenty of prophets speaking at the same time as Jeremiah, which was a time when the nation was threatened militarily, and in chaos

politically, and experiencing a severe drought. Basically, those other prophets offered soft words for that hard time. (Chapter 28) They agreed that God's people needed a bit of a tune-up, but nothing as radical as what Jeremiah knew needed to be done. They assured the people that God was on their side. God would not let them be vanquished, and God certainly would protect the temple. Here's what Jeremiah had to say about those so-called prophets: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious, saying, 'peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (8:11) So, again: how would you respond if God called you to speak hard words in a hard time, especially when others who also said they were speaking God's word offered soft words, words assuring the people of God's steadfast love, words that, unlike your words, people really wanted to hear?

Jeremiah was not the first of God's spokespeople to suffer because of his allegiance to God, and he certainly was not the last. Jesus himself experienced rejection in his home town. The official religious leaders rightly perceived his threat to their privileged position, so they conspired against him and eventually succeeded in having him executed. And his followers, right from the beginning, experienced being maligned and mistreated, disowned by their families, and threatened by people in power because they were boldly proclaiming a crucified criminal as God's way to turn the world back toward God. The stark predictions in the warnings from Jesus recorded in today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew accurately reflect reality for his earliest followers.

Today is Father's Day. For me, as for many of us, this is a day for remembering and giving thanks for the influence my father had on me, for the example he set of living true to his values. It's also a day for appreciating the way my son is father to his son, my grandson, and for re-committing myself to being a father and a grandfather worthy of being emulated. There are a few passages in the Bible which describe happy family relationships. Today's passage from Matthew isn't one of them. In today's passage, Jesus said that he had not come to bring peace, but a sword, a sword that would divide family members from each other, a sword which would put his followers at odds with the culture in which they lived. (Matthew 10:34) He came to reconcile the world to God, but that work of uniting would involve some painful dividing. Following him, he said, inevitably would "set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother; one's foes will be members of one's own household." (Matt. 10:35,36) That's harsh enough, but what Jesus said next is even harsher: "If you love your father or your mother, your son or your daughter more than me, you are not worthy of me." As with the arrangements God set up with Jeremiah, here is another particularly unattractive employee benefits package.

So again: how would you like it if God called you to speak a hard word in hard times which would earn you scorn and rejection, and would put you at odds with your own family? I'm pretty sure I wouldn't like it very much at all. Jesus said, "what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." (Matt 10:27) I tend to avoid housetops. I may hear, and hearken to, God's hard words for our times, but I prefer offering words of comfort to pushing people's buttons. Most people I know get involved in a church out of a need for meaning in our lives, for guidance and encouragement, for help dealing with our lives' challenges and stressors, and for a caring connection with God and a community of like-minded people. We especially long for such things in hard times, and these times we are living in right now are about as hard as hard times can be. Telling people that following Jesus could, or will, have a disruptive effect on our family relationships, or on our personal safety, or on the privileges we may take for granted seems at best inconsiderate and at worst unnecessarily inflammatory. When we are experiencing hard times, we'd rather not hear hard words, let alone be speaking them.

And yet, Jesus' followers are speaking hard words during these hard times. Some are speaking sobering, even scary, messages about what could go wrong if churches return to offering in-person worship. Some are sharing disturbing predictions from scientists that the virus, and ways we will need to protect ourselves from it, are here to stay. Some are making urgent calls for a fresh, sacrificial commitment of people of faith to overcoming poverty, undoing systemic racism, and addressing the climate crisis. In response to the challenges our brothers and sisters in faith are issuing, it is understandable for us to say, Look, I am totally worn out by the ways that dealing with this pandemic has disrupted my life. Don't ask me to deal with the problems that are messing up the rest of the world. I can barely handle the stuff that's messing up my life. And I certainly don't want to volunteer to be one who speaks those hard words.

But the question is not, how can we get some soft words for these hard times. The question is not, how can we accept a soft word of 'peace, peace,' when we know there is no peace. The question is, how can we hear the hard words as good news, as words we can not only hear but speak, words we can boldly proclaim as God's true word for us and for the whole world? As the problem arises from scripture, so does the solution. As scripture confronts us with the costs of following Jesus, so also does scripture assure us of the blessings that arise from following him. Right in this passage which describes the disruption caused by following Jesus, Jesus assured his followers that he would acknowledge before God those who acknowledge him before people. What this

means is that, when we live true to the gospel way, not counting the cost, we can be assured that Jesus is right with us. And later in Jesus' ministry, in response to Peter telling Jesus that those first disciples had in fact "left everything" to follow Jesus, Jesus assured them that everyone who has given up home and family for the sake of the gospel will receive new home and new family in this age, and eternal life in the age to come. (Mark 10:28-31)

In the midst of his distress, Jeremiah still could say that "the Lord is with me like a dread warrior, therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail . . . For to you, God, I have committed my cause." (20:11-12) Even though he suffered much because he spoke God's hard words, he trusted God to sustain and even vindicate him.

From Jeremiah's day down to ours, the only employee benefit that really matters is God hanging in there with those who do God's work. Here's the very good news: God goes to bat for those who are willing to pay the costs of discipleship. God certainly doesn't remove the opposition to what God knows needs to be said and done. But God promises presence, and courage, and awareness that we are part of something far greater than what we can grasp.

What our faith insists on is that the way to real peace must pass through the hard places where we recognize how we have let ourselves be tangled up in, and benefitting from, the sin of the world, the injustice and oppression that rots our world from the inside out. What our faith insists on is that the way to real life involves the taking up of our cross, giving ourselves away for the sake of the gospel. What our faith insists on is that hard words tell the truth, and that it is the truth which sets us free. Ours is not a comfortable religion. Ours is a religion at whose center is a crucified Savior. But ours also is a faith which enables us to share his life, to participate in his victory over sin and death, and which grants us unshakable peace as we speak the word that he gives us to speak.