

Sermon 3 February 2019
Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

This morning we are going to touch on all three of the readings. We begin with Jeremiah and a passage that describes the way we grow spiritually. It is a record of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet, but it is also a call to each of us—a call that speaks of our relationship with institutions in the world *and* to the nations and empires of our own hearts, the constructions of opinion and attitude that have been built *in* us through the years.

In the words of Isaiah, there is some digging up and pulling down that needs to be done; some old ways of thinking and acting need to be destroyed. Some of the things that have been built *in* us, some of the things we have been taught and absorbed need to be demolished. But the pulling down and demolition are only the necessary prelude to greater freedom and greater beauty. The old is demolished in order to build and plant a new life. We pray,

*Create in me a new heart and renew in me a right spirit.
Give me the mind of Christ and lead me in a new way of seeing,
understanding, and living.
Give me the deep peace that surpasses all my old ways of understanding.*

Illusions, misunderstandings, and damaging structures will be replaced by creations of light—compassion, kindness, courage, fearlessness, wisdom, faith, hope and love. Shaky, unstable old buildings are taken down; the Spirit makes a new dwelling place in us, a haven of blessing and a place of peace.

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This morning's second reading is one of the most beautiful, eloquent, wise, and powerful pieces of literature ever written. It is Paul at the summit of his eloquence and wisdom. His words sing of God's love and expose the deceit and obscenity of much that tries to pass as religion in the world.

Nothing in any religion is authentic if it does not express love. First Corinthians 13 is the litmus test for the validity of any religion. No

matter how eloquent or seemingly wise the teaching or the preaching, if love is not the message, it is only noise. Someone who appears to have a powerful faith but fails to love is, in Paul's words, *nothing*. Even some who seem to sacrifice themselves heroically in service to others fail the test of true faith if their actions are not shaped and driven by love.

It is a radical statement; take time to read it every day in the coming week. Read it prayerfully and see how it scours the image of what many of us have experienced as religion. It is a radical statement, but we know it is true. We have met (or we have been) people who distort the Word of God and make it into a test of words. People of the distortion are hard people to be with. They live to judge. If they are not led in love, their faith devolves, decays into sanctimonious pride and self-congratulation. Without love, religion—and any philosophy or ideology—becomes a toxic force in the world—toxic in the world and in the human heart.

If religion does not put us in a more expansive place, if it does not make us more generous and accepting, if it does not give us new measures of hope, inner peace, and welcoming joy—it is false, it is a lie, it is not about God. If our religion makes us more judgmental, more separate from others, angrier, and more afraid—it is false, it is a lie; it is not about God.

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If we read this morning's gospel lesson in the light of Corinthians, we see how corrupted religion damages us and the world around us. We see how threatening a challenge even a wonderful opportunity to change can be.

Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue. He chooses a reading from Isaiah, one of his favorite go-to books from his Jewish scriptures. Without any fanfare he begins his ministry showing us how he reads scripture. He chooses passage that matter. That day in the synagogue Jesus left out an entire line from the passage he chose. We might miss what he omitted from the reading, but I doubt his long-time neighbors missed it that day. Listen again to the passage from Isaiah.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners,
and recover of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

That is where he stops. *He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down.* Jesus stops with *the Lord's favor*, but the verse doesn't stop there. What does Jesus leave out? The next words in Isaiah are "*and a day of vengeance of our God.*" Jesus chooses to read only words of deliverance, words of God's favor, words laced with God's love—and he chooses to leave out words of judgment and vengeance. It is one of his first sermons, and he begins with the emphasis he will carry throughout his teaching years. The emphasis is always on liberation and light, healing and hope, and relentless love. Jesus' God never stops loving. There are times Jesus speaks of judgment, but it is always judgment against the forces that inhibit the free flow of love.

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Jesus sat down and began to teach. At first the people are amazed that little Jesus has grown up to be such a poised teacher, but they quickly hear him challenge their complacency. They are settled in their religion. They are comfortable with their status as Jews, and they are not open to anyone challenging their comfortable opinions about who they are and how they live.

It may be subtle to us, but the people quickly intuit what Jesus is doing. He is asking them to alter course in some of the ways they think and live. Jesus is a Jew and he is building on the past, on the foundation of his and their Jewish faith, but he is asking them to take the next step into the future God is creating. Jesus offers the future, the way the Word of God is moving—but the people would rather cling to the past. They choose past opinions and expectations, past certainties that Jesus intends to correct.

I've quoted Henri Nouwen before. He says there comes a time in every journey of faith when we are asked to give us *false certainties* and to embrace *true uncertainties*. Spend some time with that! Such a day came for the congregation in Nazareth when Jesus began to teach in their synagogue.

Jesus reminds them of two stories from their sacred scriptures—the story of Elijah and the widow, and the story of Naaman the Syrian. Both stories are about God's care for two foreigners, two people from outside the Jewish religion. God cares for the widow in a time of famine, and God heals Naaman of leprosy. These are inconvenient stories for a convenient faith in being chosen, special, more loved by God. Jesus challenges their comfortable certainty that it is okay, even proper, for them to judge others as inferior. They think being chosen means being superior instead of being entrusted with a message of universal love.

This is not a Jewish problem; it is a religious problem, and every organized religion is tempted to try to contain and restrict the scope of God's love. God is not harnessed in the doctrines of any church or religion. If there is no love, it is false; it is a lie. If it is truly loving, God is in it.

Of course God's love is sometimes tough. Jesus was tough on the people in the Nazareth synagogue. Sometimes God's love is tough on us, but it is always love. Love doesn't say *anything goes*, but love never stops loving. It never surrenders to bitterness or anger. Hatred is anathema to love; bitterness and hatred *and* love cannot live in the same space. Love never separates itself from the beloved no matter what happens. Even when God condemns something in us, something we think or something we do, some attitude or destructive addiction we have, God never condemns us. God only loves.

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We all have flawed faith. So much of what we think revolves around us. We are *egocentric* to one degree or another—and we grow (if we grow) through stages of believing.

As young people we may need a religion of rules and wisdom bytes to guide us through the confusion of adolescence, but we have to

grow up. Later in the passage from Corinthians Paul talks about the need for growing in faith. He says, *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, I thought like a child. But now that I have become an adult, I’ve put an end to childish ways.”* Too many in our world, too many of us, continue to live with a childish faith. We need to be more childlike, but we must stop being childish.

Especially as children we need the help of moral and emotional guardrails. A close family of faith should be a place of safety, a place for honest questions and adventurous exploration. However, our family of faith will damage us if it is exclusive, if it identifies itself by what it is *not* and by pointing to those outside as *not us*. We hurt our children if we give them a narrow, puny vision of a world they need to fear. We hurt them if we give them a God who judges them at every turn, a God who is not always on their side. Too many people do not grow out of their childish faith; too many do not accept God’s invitation to grow in knowledge and wisdom and in vital relationship with God. Too many cling to childish ways of thinking, judging others, and living by standards we need to let go as we continue our journey to a true faith defined and driven by love. Too many of us are afraid to risk loving like God loves.

The good news is that we can grow in love. By the grace of God we *will* grow in love. We will more and more become part of the dynamic of God’s love swirling in us and through the universe, gathering the souls of all God’s children in love’s eternal embrace.