

13 Pentecost, Proper 15, Yr. C

August 14, 2016

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

I haven't been back to the law school in Madison for a very long time, so I don't know if it's still the case, but when I was there, at the entrance, carved into stone, there was a phrase from the Gospel of John: You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And I hadn't been practicing law very long before I realized that things would indeed work better, not only in the legal system, but in every way, if people just spoke the truth. In that regard, I remember attending a seminar in which Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of ethics at Duke University, was one of the speakers. Talking about teaching ethics to future ministers, he said that when they entered his class, he told them that he could teach them all they needed to know about ethics in the ministry and in life in less than a minute. "It's simple," he said. NEVER LIE. He wasn't concerned about those little white lies we tell when someone asks us if we like their new dress, but about something much deeper – he was concerned that we all tell the truth about the nature of God and the nature of reality that we, as Christians, know – that Truth that is different from the truths of the world. The Truth he was talking about was the truth that the world without God is a mess and that we, as Christians, know it's a mess, because we know what God intends for it to be. And further that we know how to live in this time that we have – in the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> act of the play that the bishop talked about last week– in a way that exhibits our faith and our confidence in the Truth that God loves all creation and will redeem all creation and the further Truth that, being a disciple means to live that way here and now, not only exhibiting that Truth but participating in its coming to fruition.

Telling the truth. That's the subject of Jeremiah's anguish in the first reading. He was writing at the time of the ruin of the Kingdom of Judah. And, while he was himself a man of peace, he was forever at war with his own people, with kings and priests and false prophets. He spent much of his life prophesying disaster, trying to get people to listen, admonishing incompetent kings, all to no avail. Because other so-called "prophets" had a more palatable message, offering what turned out to be false comfort, telling the people and the rulers what they wanted to hear. Subsequent events proved Jeremiah right but by then, of course, it was too late. When everything is lying in ruins around you, it's not much consolation to recognize that you listened to the wrong person. In today's reading, we hear Jeremiah trying to help his listeners distinguish between true and false prophets – something we still struggle with today. How do we know who's telling the truth?

Jeremiah offered a set of criteria:

1. Was the content of the message simply too good to be true? Was it unrealistic, superficially optimistic, offering false comfort and peace, when measured against the content of the messages of the prophetic tradition which was always about faithfulness and justice and compassion?
2. Should we be suspicious of the source? Does the language, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed" reveal that the person really received a word from the Lord or is it just that person speaking their own "stuff" or what they think people want to hear?

3. And, finally, no true prophet leads people away from the demands revealed by faith in God. We know what those are: To love justice, to do mercy and to walk humbly with God in the words of the OT, or in the words of both testaments, to love God with your whole being and your neighbor as yourself. That's the measure against which we hold the words of those who would be prophets or leaders of any kind.

This is also the topic of the Gospel. We hear Jesus saying that he hasn't come to bring peace, but rather division. These are hard words but perhaps because Jesus had so little time left, he knew he couldn't soften what he knew would be the demands of discipleship. What he's saying is that a choice for him and the truth he was telling was a choice against the world's truth and that, because of that, a choice for him was going to cause trouble. He speaks specifically about division in the family but his challenge was much broader than that. His vision threatened the Roman occupation, Herod's oppression, the religious system based on ritual purity – actually his vision threatened the whole status quo of the time. Writers of the time referred to Christ and those who followed him as people who were turning the world upside down because they were not only proposing a different way of life, but were living it. In a world full of divisions, they said, that in God's eyes, there was no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, that all were created in God's image and therefore, worthy of love and respect.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus challenges his listeners to read the signs of the times and act accordingly. When we look around today and tell the truth about the world, I'm not so sure that we can point to a lot of progress. We're still surrounded by divisions: young/old, rich/poor, conservative/liberal, black/white, male/female, healthy/disabled, straight/gay, powerful/powerless, educated/ignorant – the list could go on and on. When the Bishop spoke last week he used using the metaphor of a Shakespearian play and suggested that we, at the beginning of the final act, have the first four acts - the creation, the fall, the prophets, and Jesus – coupled with the end of the story, when all the creation will be redeemed, as our guide for how to live here and now. We're sort of living in the gap. If you look at the Hebrews reading from last week and this morning, we have a list of those who have gone before us, living out the faith, first of the OT and then of Jesus . The writer of Hebrews uses the metaphor of a race; that they and we, are running toward Christ. It's a great image in these days of the Olympics – it's like we're in a relay race and the baton has been passed to us for this section of the race. We know the finish line, we know what we have to do to get there, we're being cheered on by that "great cloud of witnesses" who have gone before us.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to persevere, to keep our focus on the finish line, on what matters. Never having run a relay, I can still understand what he means. We can't wander off, or be distracted or just quit. Many spiritual writers today talk about the fact that, especially in US, it's easy to fall into complacency. I think that's probably quite true. I had a conversation this past week with someone from Chicago and I said something to the effect that Door County was a wonderful place, but that we could be a bit isolated and insulated. She responded, a bit sharply, that people up here were into escapism. I don't think that's correct, but I do think that it would be easy to be complacent. Given that it's PMF season

now with MSM coming along the end of the month, there's a good story about Beethoven that's right on-point. The story is that Beethoven would sometimes play a trick on polite salon audiences, especially when he guessed that they weren't all that interested in serious music. He would perform a piece on the piano, perhaps one of his own slow movements, which would be so gentle and beautiful that everyone would be lulled into thinking the world was a soft, cozy place, where they could think beautiful thoughts and relax into semi-slumber. Then, just as the final notes were dying away, he would bring his whole forearm down with a crash across the keyboard, and laugh at the shock he gave to the assembled company. A bit impolite and crude perhaps, but the shock of that crash is a good image for what Jesus had to say in this Luke passage.

I'm guessing that it's been pretty hard, this election season, to be lulled into a sense of complacency as we've been confronted over and over with the fact that we aren't yet in the peaceable kingdom God has in mind. But perhaps the shock of the season is a good thing. Perhaps we've been confronted by the truth – the truth that there is a segment of our society that is enraged and fearful and despairing and is therefore vulnerable to exploitation. Perhaps there's the greater truth that there is no real peace and security for one unless there is the peace and security for all. Perhaps we have been given a glimpse of the truth that true peace will only be accomplished when our society and our world are characterized by God's righteousness and justice.

Maybe our first temptation isn't to complacency but, instead, to despair. In that regard, it's helpful to remember the vision of Julian of Norwich in which she saw God holding what looked like a hazelnut in his hand. When she asked about it, He said that it was all of creation; that he had his hand on it and would never remove his hand. That vision allowed her to utter her most familiar words: that all shall be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well. Therefore, we go forward, not in despair or in complacency, but in confidence that we are held in the hands of God, which allows us to make Kingdom decisions and to live Kingdom lives. Amen.