

4 Epiphany, Yr. C

February 3, 2018

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Will Willimon, a bishop in the Methodist church, tells a story about preaching a children's sermon in which he asked the kids, "What is it that perches in a tree, eats nuts and has a bushy tail?" And the answer came back: GOD. That got quite a laugh and, after the service, he asked the boy why he didn't say it was a squirrel. The young fellow answered, "Well, we're in church and you're the pastor, so I expected that the right answer had to be GOD." That leads to what I'd like us to look at today: assumptions and expectations. Willimon also said that he had asked a good many people what they wanted in a sermon. He got various answers: a better understanding of a Biblical passage, inspiration, a word to help me live a better life. All of those are good answers, he said, but the real purpose of a sermon is to bring us closer to the living and true God. And that often means that our ideas about God, our assumptions and expectations have to be looked at and corrected and then expanded and enriched. That's not an easy thing to do. It requires a willingness to change our

minds. I remember something Peter Gomes said about that – that he was reluctant to let in new ideas. “I have so few good ideas,” he said, “and I like the ones I have.” I think we can all relate to that.

Today’s readings, especially the ones from Jeremiah and Luke talk about preachers who get into trouble when they overturn expectations. Jeremiah was preaching during a relatively quiet period in Israel, in between the waning power of Assyria and the growing power of Babylon. We heard in the first reading about his call to preach and his reluctance to do so. His message wasn’t what people wanted to hear. They wanted to hear that Israel would regain its former power and status – it would be great again. He preached for 40 years and suffered rejection and hatred, even from family and friends, to say nothing of those in power that he was preaching against. When what he had warned against came to pass, he was exiled to Egypt where he died.

In a continuation of Luke’s Gospel from last week, we hear a bit more about how Jesus’ inaugural sermon went. You’ll remember last week he got up and read from Isaiah and then told his listeners that

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” We soon see how they felt about that. At first Luke says that they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. But then, who knows why, Jesus challenges them by saying that they aren’t happy because he’s not doing the miracles in Nazareth that they heard he had done in Capernaum (expectations here) And then he goes on to say that no prophet is ever accepted in his hometown. OK – but then he goes further and reminds them that in the days of Elijah and Elisha, when there were plenty of widows and lepers in Israel, God chose instead to heal a foreign widow and even worse, a Syrian general. That did it. They responded by trying to kill him. And that was because, while they were fine with him interpreting the Isaiah reading, which they knew and had undoubtedly heard many times before, their expectation was that perhaps here was the Messiah and that meant that he had come to vindicate Israel against its enemies, to restore it to its favored status as the chosen people. But Jesus was trying to enlarge their vision of who God was – they were trying to hang on to God as a tribal deity. They were

quite satisfied with the narrow vision of God that they had and weren't interested in trading that in. As someone pointed out, it's like going shopping for a new sofa. You measure the space that you have and go for a piece of furniture that will fit that space – nothing bigger than that, because you'd have to rearrange everything. Yes. That's what Jesus was asking them to do – to rearrange their assumptions and their vision of God and the way they were living.

The struggle to do this isn't something that's limited to ancient Israel, however. The challenge of growth into a larger vision is hard. Bible scholars remind us that if my God is a being who loves only the people I love and hates all the people I hate, I need to think again. And being humans, it's easy for us to find comfort in our cherished ideas and difficult for us to examine whether those ideas are moving us ever closer to the living and true God.

There's quite a bit of work being done these days on how we think and how our biases and preconceptions can trap us. One professor, at the University of Pennsylvania, writes about how hard it is for us to recognize that we have blind spots and to

admit that even though we hold an idea with absolute conviction, it could still be wrong. He suggests that we need to be open to new ideas, to consult with others, to chat, and schmooze and, above all to be willing to listen to different perspectives. The biggest problem, he points out is that when we don't get it, we don't KNOW that we're not getting it. He cites a number of experiments where the right answer to a question would have been "I don't know," and people's absolute reluctance to ever say that.

A number of us are reading some great novels by Louise Penny whose protagonist is the head of homicide in Quebec, Armand Gamache. He always tells his new trainees that there are four important questions they need to be able to ask and "I don't know" is one of them. The others are: I was wrong, I'm sorry and I need help. Good questions that could be coming from a theologian as well as a novelist.

And finally, there's Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Again, you'll remember that this is a fractious group, divisions over spiritual gifts, over class and status,

over who brought them into the community. This reading is well-known and well-loved. It's used, as you know, at many weddings, although Paul's original intent was to help the Corinthians build the kind of community that would truly become the body of Christ. Yes, Paul tells them, spiritual gifts are good, but the building up of the community in love is the main thing. Spiritual unity, the common good, agape love – that's what God wants and that's what will bind the community together.

These scriptures are about being called by God: we heard about Jeremiah's call and we've heard about God's call to Jesus. But Paul is writing about the call that comes to all of us. It's the call to love that's set out in Paul's letter. That call comes in different ways, but each of us is here because we heard it in some way. And we accepted that call when we were baptized, which is the first and primary ordination we all received. And just as our calls will differ, what we're called to do will also be different. Some are called to great public ministries but most of us are called to a more quiet faithfulness, doing with love whatever is set before us. Famously, Martin Luther wrote somewhere that within the call to parenthood,

even changing dirty diapers is something done for the glory of God. One person I read talked about meeting a woman named Eula Hall, who called herself a “hillbilly activist.” She had started the Mud Creek Clinic in Southeast Kentucky because, she said, “I looked and I said to myself, ‘taint right like this, no medical services, ‘taint right. Somebody needs to act.’ I guess that somebody was me.”

I began the sermon with a quote from a Methodist bishop, let me close with something Mike Eischen shared with me about ordination in the Methodist church. When someone is being ordained, the entire congregation prays the following prayer, marking the call that EVERYONE in that congregation has received and is trying to live out:

Let me be your servant, under your command.  
I am no longer my own, but yours  
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering  
Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you  
exalted for you or brought low for you;  
Let me be full, let me be empty  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things  
to your pleasure and disposal  
And now glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
You are mine and I am yours. So be it.

Whatever else one can say about that prayer, it  
takes incredible courage and incredible trust to pray  
it. Amen.