

4 Pentecost, Proper 8, Yr. A

June 28, 2020

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Romans 6:12-23

This morning, I'd like to focus on the reading from Jeremiah and Paul's letter to the Romans. Both of those readings can be seen to be about choice.

We heard from Jeremiah last week and his rejection and disappointment when he wasn't heard. If we had the whole section, it would read like a script from a TV drama. The background is that Judah is a vassal state, owing tribute to the Babylonians. 2 years earlier, the Babylonians had conquered Judah and led some of its leaders off into exile. The question of the day is whether Judah should revolt against the Babylonian rule. As a later commentator pointed out, the country is standing at the edge of a cliff as it approaches this decision.

Jeremiah is taking the position that to revolt would mean destruction and that Judah would be better off to submit to Babylonian rule. To make his point, he's been walking around with a yoke around his neck, the yoke, of course, symbolizing that submission. His prophecy is not what people want to hear.

Hananiah, on the other hand, is part of the king's court, and he has a different message. God will be faithful to his covenant with us and will give us victory. To illustrate his point, he grabs the yoke and

smashes it on the floor. His message is more palatable; it's what people want to hear.

And, as he leaves, Jeremiah reminds people that, when you have to decide who's telling the truth, when you have to decide who to follow, the proof will be in what happens. But of course, that's not much help when you are making the decision in the present with no hindsight available.

These two men have alternative visions of God. Hananiah is tying God to a nationalist hope. His understanding of God's relationship with Israel is that God will protect them and release them from the Babylonians. Jeremiah is saying, yes, God is faithful, but that doesn't translate into an insurance policy that you can pull out when you need rescue. Instead, he is saying, God is using Nebuchadnezzar to turn our hearts and minds back to God.

So, they have to make a choice. Who to follow? Turns out that they made the wrong choice. Jeremiah was right and Hananiah was offering false comfort.

Those kinds of questions, about what to choose, who to follow, are always with us. Certainly, there's a caution here: we are easily influenced by what we want and what we think will best serve our interests. Another caution: be wary of quick and easy answers served up by popular and charming leaders.

That choice is with us today as we live through these times of stress and anxiety. On the one side, there's that old message: don't worry, be happy and on the other side there's the message that cautions that, as Christians we have a responsibility to be sure that all our decisions, whether private or public, contribute to the common good, to the coming of the Kingdom.

One contemporary theologian says that we suffer from two pathologies today: the first is denial and the remedy for that is radical truth-telling, not false hope, not obfuscation, but truth. And the second is the temptation to despair. And the remedy for that is a radical hope that gives us both vision and the energy and will to act.

Romans is also about choice. We're coming in here at Chapter 6, so it's a good idea to review what went before. In the preceding chapter, Paul has been celebrating GRACE – the continuous gift of a God who never gives up on us and who sent Jesus Christ to destroy sin and death. Paul's been concentrating on the idea that grace overcomes sin, so he says that if sin abounds, grace abounds even more. And then it's like he suddenly realizes that people might interpret this to mean, well if grace abounds, let's sin to our hearts' content!

It's a little like the preschooler who spilled an entire carton of milk all over the kitchen floor. He was devastated. His mother got the mop and cleaned it all

up and, in an effort to make him feel better, said, “There! You see? Now the whole kitchen floor is bright and clean!” And his response, which Paul would understand was “Great! Maybe I should spill milk more often!”

To correct the misunderstanding that we should sin more in order to get more grace, Paul goes back to the idea of baptism – the fact that we have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ makes us new persons. This new identity is described in a midrash which says that every person, rich, poor, old, young, black, white, is preceded through life by an angel who cries out, “Make way for the image of God; make way for the image of God!” How would we live if we could just remember that angel and maybe even glimpse it now and then?

But Paul also understood baptism in the context of the Exodus. Just as the Israelites were held captive by the Pharaoh, so are we held in bondage by sin. And just as God broke the power of Pharaoh by leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, so the power of sin over us is broken by the water of baptism. And just as it took a long time for the Israelites in the desert, so too, even though sin has no power over us, and we have this new identity, it takes time for us to understand what that means, and to accept it – the joy, the suffering, the responsibility. We have to grow into that understanding.

One more thing, more relevant to today's reading. Paul understood the world in binary terms. He lived in a world in which slavery was common and he believed that every person lived his or her life subject to a master: either God (which he would call righteousness) or the world (which he would call sin.) This falls somewhat jarringly on our ears. But what he's saying is that each of us has an ultimate loyalty to something. It's been suggested that our ultimate loyalty in the 21st century is to the idea of self-sufficiency. That we can think and believe and choose and do for ourselves. Paul, on the other hand, is saying that it's only possible to find true freedom, rather paradoxically, in 'enslavement' to God. Or better, to the freedom we find in service to God.

This all bumps up against the concept of FREEDOM. We hear that word all the time. These days it's being used by people who say that wearing a mask to help stop the pandemic is an affront to their freedom. Because it's almost the 4th of July, it's helpful to look back at those first colonists. They wanted to be free – from a distant king, from a government that could tell them how to speak and how to worship. But they were also clear that that freedom had a price. For some of them, it was a literal price put on their heads by the King of England.

The essence of freedom is the ability to choose. For Paul and the rest of the Christian tradition, as well as

for those early American founders, freedom was not an end itself, but only a means. Paul would say that the end of freedom is meant to be the kind of happiness that will only be found in a life of commitment and service. The founders, writing as they were in the political arena, would have said that the end was domestic tranquility but they would have agreed that commitment and service were essential. All would have agreed that we are created to live lives that are linked to a higher purpose than self-gratification.

Because I've tied this sermon to our American value of freedom, let me close with two quotes, one by Alex de Tocqueville and one by John Adams. De Tocqueville said that Americans sought freedom from popes and archbishops and kings so that they could live lives that gave them freedom for the covenantal love of God and neighbor. And John Adams, in a letter to his 12-year old son, said that at that age the understanding opens and the youth begins to look abroad into the world among whom they are to live. His advice: TO BE GOOD, he wrote, AND TO DO GOOD, IS ALL WE HAVE TO DO.

God help us to do so. Amen.