

“Chasing the Truth out of Town”
January 31, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-8
Luke 4:22-30

The passage Ellen read from the prophet Jeremiah a few minutes ago was one of the first Bible passages I read after I experienced a call to ministry.

After several months of keeping quiet about hearing a call to ministry, I finally found my way to the church where I was eventually ordained. Early on after I became involved in that church, one of its ministers gave me a list of readings from the Bible and suggested that I pray with some of them. I confess – I thought his suggestion was weird, strange, too bizarre for words. At that point, I wasn't someone who prayed, or at least not in any way I thought of as prayer. And I wasn't someone who read the Bible. So I sure wasn't someone who would actually put those two things together! Still, I was enough of a compliant youngest child and enough of a comply-with-the-rules lawyer that I was willing to try the minister's suggestion.

I went home and asked Chey if we had a Bible. I knew I didn't have one, and I didn't think she did, either. Lo and behold, though, she had the Bible from one of her grandmothers. Within a day or two, I took some time one evening to sit in silence for a while and then to open Chey's Bible to the book of Jeremiah – chapter one, verses four through eight. The first few lines resonated a bit, but then came the back and forth between Jeremiah and God:

“Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth,’
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.”

All alone – or so I thought – and out of the blue – or so I thought – I felt as though I'd found a much-needed kindred spirit in Jeremiah. I felt as though I'd found someone else who had responded to a sense of God's presence and call with a fearful, resounding, “Not me! Surely not me! I'm all wrong for this going and speaking thing you're talking about. I'm too young ... too old ... too introverted ... too extroverted ... too happy with my life as it is ... too liberal ... too conservative ... too tall ... too short ... too rich ... too poor.” In this short passage, I thought that I'd found in Jeremiah someone who had felt the same way I was feeling – unnerved and fearful.

But why would Jeremiah or anyone else sensing a call from God feel afraid? I can think of a few reasons just for starters. Perhaps not so much in Jeremiah's time, but certainly in ours, there's the fear that hearing or sensing a call from God is actually the first sign that we're losing our minds. Perhaps less so in Jeremiah's community, but often in ours, there's also the fear that we're going to end up like fundamentalists in any of a number of religions who sound remarkably the same as they explain *both* their own superiority *and* God's desire to wipe out all who are different.

But perhaps more importantly, anyone experiencing a genuine calling from the Spirit to go into the world and proclaim the depth of God's love and the clarity of God's call to justice and mercy would be foolhardy not to realize

that the road ahead will be dangerous. Jeremiah's life is but one example. He lived the dangers of becoming one of the Spirit's prophets – he experienced not only ridicule, rejection, and loneliness, but also arrest, imprisonment, and the threat of execution.

For others called to go and speak wherever and whatever God commanded has them, the *threat* of danger has often turned into the reality of murder – Jesus of Nazareth comes to mind, for one. So do Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, numerous nuns, priests, and others working for justice and peace, all of them assassinated in India, Tennessee, and Central America. Assassinated because they responded to the Spirit's call to speak the truth of the preciousness of the unprivileged and of the horror of injustice and indifference. Countless others have risked and lost their lives, knowing that they were called to stand up, for example, to the drug dealers in their own neighborhoods or to the powerful in government, business, and the military.

To stand at the virtual or real street corner and proclaim the word of God is a risky venture. To stand at the corner, as many of you have done, proclaiming that war is not the answer, that God blesses and rejoices in lesbian and gay couples no less than in straight couples, that no human being is illegal, and that health care should be truly available to all ... to stand at the corner and proclaim the truth of God as you have come to know and believe it is to take a risk.

Here, in this particular time and place, the risk may, in an important sense, be minimal – the risk of being yelled at or cursed, the risk of being ridiculed in person or in print, the risk of someone making sure that he drives through a rain puddle in just the right way to send the water straight for you as you stand at the corner. But in other times and in other places, the risk is the risk of imprisonment, physical attack, lost homes and jobs, torture, and execution.

In a world intoxicated with violence, in a species that vacillates between being convinced it can control all of nature and trying desperately to regain the control it's never had, in a time when every aspect of life is being turned into a commodity for sale and profit, it is easy, very easy, to understand why someone might be afraid and try to avoid the call from God when it comes.

In a world that seems contemptuous of the very notion that every person is the Spirit's precious creation whom we're called to love and honor and that every ecosystem, and all that is in it, is the Spirit's precious creation that we're called to love and honor, the idea of going wherever the Spirit of compassion sends and speaking whatever the Spirit of justice commands is scary and daunting. In a badly broken world, speaking God's challenging truth is dangerous to the speaker precisely because it is dangerous to the status quo.

So it really should come as no surprise that the story of Jesus' appearance in the Nazareth synagogue ends with an enraged crowd driving him out of town, planning to toss him off a cliff. As you may remember from last week's reading, Jesus has gone to the synagogue in Nazareth, as was his custom, and he has read these words from the scroll of Isaiah: "The Spirit of

the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus then explains to those gathered that this scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. He is thus announcing to Nazareth, and will soon announce to the world beyond Nazareth, that he is a danger to the status quo. He has announced that he is a danger to any system or society proclaiming that the poor are poor because they deserve it, that the poor are poor because God has forsaken them, that the poor are poor because poverty is inevitable. Jesus has announced that he is a danger to any system or society that promotes, defends, or simply ignores oppression. He has announced that he's a danger to any system or society that depends on imprisonment and blinded hearts and minds for its survival.

Having thus announced that he's dangerous, Jesus would seem to be at risk of being run out of town then and there, but that's not the way this story unfolds. Instead, after Jesus has told the gathering that he has come to bring good news to the poor and to let the oppressed go free, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that come from his mouth.”

I imagine this is the sort of reception Jesus might get here, in the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC, should he appear one day and tell us that he's been anointed to bring good news to the poor and to let the oppressed go free. We're a somewhat socially conscious congregation. We're a progressive Christian church. We have a tendency to think of ourselves as being on the side of the poor and oppressed, so I think we would be speaking well of Jesus after he had spoken, just as the Jews in the Nazareth synagogue did. I think we'd be able to recognize him as anointed by God to bring healing and justice, just as the Jews in the Nazareth synagogue did.

But, of course, this story doesn't end with praise and welcome for Jesus. It ends instead with rejection, even attempted murder. What happened? What happened in a few moments in that synagogue long ago? More important, would it also happen here, in the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC? Would we be willing to rejoice when the message confirms us in our view of ourselves and the world, but, when God's anointed won't conform to our expectations or perform according to our script, would our welcome and praise turn ugly?

First, let's return to what happened in Nazareth. What happened was that Jesus the miracle worker told the assembly that he would not show them signs or do the works he had done in another place. What happened was that Jesus the prophet told the assembled worshippers that, despite their initial welcome, they would never truly embrace him. Jesus the prophet told them their welcome was only skin deep. Jesus the prophet told them they would not be willing or able to accept his words and follow him.

This story isn't just about some people long ago in Nazareth. We don't read this story on a Sunday morning to be able to discuss – or argue – whether or not this incident actually took place. This story isn't history; it isn't a morality tale. This story is about us. This story is about us and how we receive or reject the call of the Spirit that comes through Jesus. This story is about us and whether we're willing to go deeper and discover our resistance to the Spirit's call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

This story, I believe, is offering us the truth that those of us who gather in this church are just as vulnerable as were those who assembled in Nazareth to switching from *applause* for the easy words ... to *anger* at the challenging words that come through Jesus. We are just as vulnerable to saying, “Yes, yes!” to Jesus’ general words of care for those who are poor, oppressed, exploited, and then to shouting, “No, no!!” to Jesus’ words that threaten our own comfort or complacency.

We are just as likely to want to run Jesus out of town when his prophetic voice comes to us, reminding us that the poor of the world are not poor simply because of what *other* people and *other* societies and *other* governments have done and continue to do. We are just as likely to want to run Jesus out of town when he reminds us that the poor of the world are poor because of what *we* and *our* society and *our* government also have done and continue to do.

We are just as likely to want to run Jesus out of town as they were in the synagogue long ago, when his prophetic voice comes to us and reminds us that each and every day, we’re given many chances to choose a life that opposes poverty and oppression or to choose, instead, a life that supports or ignores poverty and oppression. We’re likely to want to run Jesus out of town when he shines a bright light on how we spend our time, our money, our dreams, and our hopes on our own comfort and convenience, our own safety and security, instead of on how we can become good news to the poor and how we can act so that the oppressed can go free.

My beloved brothers and sisters, you and I are vulnerable to being part of a crowd running Jesus out of town for putting a mirror before us and making us uncomfortable. In our more lost moments, you and I are vulnerable to being part of a crowd wanting to throw him off the cliff or under the proverbial bus. We are vulnerable because this is what it is to be human ... vulnerable, scared, and wanting to hold on to life as we know it, even when life *as it can be* is far more glorious than we can imagine.

But there is good news for us, too. There is good news to us in our poverty of courage or compassion or imagination, and the good news is that our anger cannot stop the Spirit that was and is at work through Jesus. Our anger and our rageful attempts to silence the Spirit do not have the last word. Instead, Jesus keeps passing through the midst of our anger and rejection, our fear and resistance, and keeps returning, to invite us to follow him. Even if we follow in Jeremiah’s footsteps and try to duck God’s call by offering excuses, the call will come to us again and again, inviting us to follow.

The next time that call comes to any of us, may we respond, even in our fear, with a resounding, “YES!”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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