Tough Love and the Humanity of God
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
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Scripture:
Jeremiah 1:4-10

How does God speak to you? What does God ask you to do with your life?

Those are good questions on any day, for any one. In the history of God' relationship with humanity, though, God has reserved a special call to those we know as prophets. Today, the lectionary of suggested scripture readings includes the opening verses of Jeremiah, one of the most substantial books in the Bible.

Every biblical prophet has his or her own particular role to play. For Jeremiah, it was a call to speak a harsh word to God's wayward people. They had abandoned God's ways and were in for a lesson.

To say it was a time of crisis for God's people would be an understatement. The empire of Babylonia ruled over much of the region, including Judah, which had split off from Israel years earlier. Whatever hopes that God's people would return to right relationship with God had fizzled when the reformer King Josiah died. The Babylonians ruled with an iron fist and God's people wandered even further away from their covenant responsibilities to live as God instructed.

God's word through Jeremiah is stern, an example of what some might say is the hard, unsympathetic God of the Old Testament, the God who admonishes and punishes seemingly more than anything else. What comes to mind is the image of Judah bent over God's knee, about to get a dose of tough love. If you've ever been in that situation, you know the words that are usually spoken before the punishment begins.

"This will hurt me more than it will hurt you."

But if you're the one bracing for that first lick as your bare bottom is sticking out, all you can think is, "That's easy for you to say."

Should we dismiss the God of the Old Testament that glibly? Or should we take time to think about whether it does hurt God when God's people go astray? The opening verses

of Jeremiah invite us to do just that – to ask whether God dishes out judgment without feeling, or whether God suffers even as we suffer.

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As for Jeremiah, he wasn't given much of a choice of what to do with his life.

"I am only a boy," he said to God when God called him to the life of prophecy. As Danny Trapp wrote in his "In Turn" column in this month's newsletter, this kind of "not-me" response is typical of those whom God calls. Plenty of others had tried that with God. And no wonder. The life of a prophet is no bowl of cherries. Prophets stand on the outside of life. They say unpopular things. As Frederick Buchner wrote: "A prophet's quarrel with the world is deep-down a lover's quarrel. Their quarrel is God's quarrel."[1]

It is a quarrel, nonetheless, and we hear in these opening lines of Jeremiah God's sense of urgency in changing Judah's direction. His instruction to Jeremiah:

"See, today, I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (1:10)

Pluck up. Pull down. Destory. Overthrow. Built. Plant. Yes, we hear that building and planting are God's final intentions, but plucking up and pulling down and destroying and overthrowing must come first. If we do the math on Jeremiah's assignment as it is seen there in verse 10, it's two-thirds destruction. God is clear. There will be pain on the way to restoration. This is the God of expectations and accountability.

Last week in Sunday school, Jeff Mitchiner made the point that we Presbyterians don't dwell much on the judgmental side of God. That's especially true for progressive Presbyterians, isn't it? We're skilled at skirting around that side of God. We prefer the God of grace, the champion of the powerless and the oppressed.

If there is to be judgment, we say to ourselves, it is judgment of those other people, the people who are part of systemic injustice and dominance. Lord knows, that doesn't include us. We race to the gospels and stand with Jesus as he eats with outcasts and rails against those who misuse power, overlooking the fact that, from his parables to his preaching, Jesus himself could preach a tough line and hold a high bar for how we are to live our lives in right relationship with God.

[1] Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC, p. 75

Along the way, consciously or not, we only reinforce for ourselves and others this dichotomy of God – that the judging God lives in the Old Testament and focused only on those stiff-necked people who failed time and again to live up to God's expectations. The God of the New Testament, well, that's the God for us, the God of unconditional love, or so we think. Let's all hold hands and sing a verse of Jesus loves me.

But that is not the God of all of scripture or all of history, for that matter. And if we tell ourselves that God has no expectations of us and that the matter of how – or whether – we practice right faith has no consequences, well, all we do is try to tame and diminish our creator. We don't limit God, though that may be our ulterior motive. No, all we do is limit our faith and decrease our grasp of what is possible for the kingdom of God that has broken through on earth.

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How, then, can we reconcile these two views of God – the God of judgment and the God of grace? How do we connect them? How can we conceive of God in such fullness that both of these aspects – and others – exist in one deity?

One way might be simply to say that – that God is God, a deity that we cannot make sense of or understand, a being so foreign and distant as to be beyond us, and therefore, beyond the reach of our love or our reason. Humility does have its place in the life of faith, but not to the extent that we give up on seeking God, on understanding God.

This takes us back, then, to that moment when we hear those words: "This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you." Do we dismiss that as an insincere self-justification of tough love? Or, do we take those words to heart?

Jeremiah helps us with the answers to those questions. As much tough love as its chapters hold, Jeremiah also speaks of the anguish of God, a God who is profoundly saddened by what has become of God's people, a God who hates what must be done. Listen to the pain and deep disappointment in God's voice as he instructs Jeremiah to recount how the people of Israel have fallen away from God's abundant love:

"What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? They did not say, Where is the Lord, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?

“I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who handled the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.”

Do we hear the sorrow in God’s voice? Two chapters later, God speaks again through Jeremiah. Listen to the mingling of God’s sadness with a sense of foreboding over an impending attack on God’s people, the direct consequence of their own action:

“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent for I hear the sound of a trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid wasted. Suddenly, my tents are destroyed … For my people are foolish …. They are skilled in doing evil but do not know how to do good.”

This is not a God who heartlessly hurls lightning bolts to wipe out a problem start over. These are the words and the sentiments of a God who knows us intimately and adores us longingly, a God whose heart breaks with that of the people.

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In the middle part of the 20th century, the great theologian Karl Barth expressed the depth and dimension of God’s sympathy as the “humanity of God.” At a conference of ministers and theologians, he took his colleagues to task for years of theology that put God on a pedestal, a “wholly other” deity who stood exalted and abstract, distant from creation and removed from humanity’s joy and humanity’s suffering. That is not the God we see if we look deeply in the Old Testament. It is especially not the God we see in Jesus Christ.

Excusing Barth for his gender-based language, we read his words. In Christ, he wrote, we are not dealing with a God who “exists only separated from man, distant and strange and thus a non-human if not indeed an inhuman God. In Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man. Rather, in (Christ) we see the history and the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together, the reality of the covenant mutually contracted, preserved and fulfilled by (both of) them.”

Christ, Barth goes on to say, is not just the mediator of God’s love. Christ reveals that God’s deity, God’s holy being, God’s godliness, *includes* everything we see in humanity, our humanity.

That is a remarkable thought, is it not? It tells us that God feels our pain. God knows our despair and depression. God grasps our anxiety. God understands our loneliness and vulnerability

But God also experiences our delight and our quiet contentment, our joy and our pleasure. God exists in all of it. If we are made in the form of God, God is not just the author of every emotion. God did not just make them up, take them out for a test drive, endow us with our emotions and then go back to being something "other" than us. God actively experiences what we experience in the very same moments we do.

It's too bad the great Reformer John Calvin didn't dwell more on all of this, Barth said. Had Calvin pushed for a deeper understanding of the humanity of God, Barth said, Calvin would not have been such a gloomy fellow.

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Not all of us are called to be prophets, a blessing for which we might thank our God. But what we do have in common with Jeremiah and every other prophet and every other servant of our creator is what God told Jeremiah before anything else.

"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you."

As you go into the world, brothers and sisters, remember that same goes for you. God knew you before you were formed in the womb. Before you were born, God consecrated you, God set you apart. So, it is that God does have expectations of us, and God is not above setting us straight when we stray.

God plucks up and God pulls down when there is no other choice and, when it comes to that, God feels every ounce of sorrow and every pang of anguish. But, in the end, as promised through Jeremiah to Judah, God builds and God plants. Hope has the last word. Our lives are endowed with meaning and, as an old church father said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." [2]

Amen

[2] St. Irenaeus, second century Christian bishop.