

“On Jeremiah’s Baptism” by Kevin L. Ogle



August 22, 2010

Homily: On Jeremiah’s Baptism

Pentecost 13/Proper 16

Texts:

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13-10-17

(Hebrews 12:18-29)

Gracious God, apart from you our mouths are dumb and we have nothing to say. So send us we pray your Holy Spirit, that in hearing your word we might know what we ought to know, and see what we can do, to truly become your faithful people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

[Thank you to Seekers for your graciousness in once again sharing a Sunday Service with those who are no longer living in your midst, and for again including Communion in this

service.] Two years ago it seemed more of a stretch to find the lection text that I could really lean into when preparing to talk about the topic of baptism for Nathaniel at Seekers as his spiritual home. This year also I did not check the lection texts in advance of scheduling with Celebration Circle for Jeremiah's baptismal service here. So, for today I expected a similar struggle.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the Hebrew Bible text for this Sunday was the call of the biblical prophet whose name Jeremiah shares! That, I confess, I took as a good sign.

At the very least it provides the opportunity to share again here why Carol Ann and I chose Jeremiah to be the name of the second son we were blessed to welcome into the world in Sept. 1997.

But this lection selection also confronts us with Seekers' summer liturgical them this year: Wrath of a Loving God. For the call of Jeremiah the biblical prophet was to proclaim both the judgment and fidelity of a loving, tenacious God. And it was a call to a ministry of drama, turmoil, imprisonment, and anguish.

So let me reassure Jeremiah and the rest of you that it was not because we hope that Jeremiah will have a career like the biblical prophet, called to speak God's judgment and consequence to the Kings of Judah in a time of militarism, social injustice, and the incarceration of those who dared speak God's truth to power. The lectionary in upcoming weeks as it moves through passages from the book of Jeremiah will provide ample reminder that Jeremiah was a prophet who personally suffered greatly because of his call to speak what God commanded him to speak, and who recoiled at the harsh consequences of that message for his beloved country.

So, Jeremiah, while we admire the prophet Jeremiah's

fidelity to his call, we hope that the shape of the Christian vocation you are embracing through baptism today will not lead you to the prophet's suffering and lament. Still, we acknowledge that following God's call for your life may lead to experiences and challenge that will stretch you in the service of that call in ways that might leave us a parents dismayed or at least uncomfortable. But I am getting ahead of myself.

The reason you have your name is much more personal, and is related more to the verses of Jeremiah Chapter 31[:27-35], words of promise, comfort, justice and a new covenant God would make with God's people. A time when:

[29]...they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But all shall die for their own sins: the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

[31] The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant...with the house of Israel and Judah...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, 'Know the Lord' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Now these verses have often been seen as part of the prelude for the New Covenant with God that Christians associate with Jesus. But for purposes of explaining our Jeremiah's name they have much more to do with his parent's journey as parents in the context of Seekers as our faith community home. Like most first-time parents, Carol Ann and I were learning about how to be parents with our first-born child. We consulted books, we talked to other parents and

grandparents and compared notes about surviving the months of sleepless nights that parenthood often brings. We gave each other feedback, and often challenged each other's unconscious assumptions of what being a father or mother meant. We were a bit anxious and worried when we strayed from the recommendations of certain authorities on parenting young children. And we gradually grew into our roles as parents of an only child, until life seemed in balance again – for a brief time, anyway, until we realized not long after Nathaniel turned three, that another child was on the way.

So, hoping we had learned a few things about parenthood and more confident in our relationship as co-parents, we chose Jeremiah to be the name of that on-the-way son. In a Seekers service of naming we explained that we hoped Jeremiah's name would be a reminder: a reminder to help us not set our children's teeth on edge because of our own anxieties and humanness, and to help us trust that the love God had written into each other's heart was a reliable guide for the continued adventure of parenthood and becoming a larger family.

Of course, one of the things we have come to learn since is that there really is no long-lasting equilibrium in the journey of parenthood. As both of our boys have proceeded through their stages of human development pretty much on schedule, I confess as a father that I often see that development as either too soon or too slow – depending on the milestone. But I note today that with time, those milestones have seemed to come more and more quickly – too quickly, if I am honest.

So, two years ago, then at the age of 14, in true ecumenical style, Nate chose to be baptized at Seekers after his Presbyterian Confirmation and Disciples of Christ Pastor's Class. Now, almost 13, Jeremiah has chosen to be baptized at Seekers following his Disciples of Christ Pastor's Class this spring at First Christian Falls Church, as he too claims Seekers as his spiritual home. And so Jeremiah will be able

to look back to this day when he takes his upcoming Confirmation class, reflecting on a baptism he has experienced rather than on one that is to come.

And as he prepares for that baptism, since it has been some time since most here have been able to spend time with Jeremiah, I wanted to share with you some of the ways that I see him carrying the marks of Seekers in his Spirit and being. For one, he is a very thoughtful and intelligent. Jon Smoot, the Interim Senior Pastor at Falls Church Presbyterian, after bringing back a carload of youth that included Jeremiah from mission camp in mid-July this summer, marveled to me afterwards about the sophistication that Rev. Smoot heard in Jeremiah's vocabulary while eavesdropping on that back-seat conversation.

But the overriding Seekers qualities I see in Jeremiah go hand-in-hand – he possesses a true empathy and compassion for others and creation, and (like the biblical prophet) he is troubled at the brokenness and injustice of the world. So he was totally into the 7th Grade Challenge Day program at his school, the closest thing the Falls Church City Schools has to a peace-making curriculum in the form of diversity and anti-bullying training. Afterwards he articulately shared with Carol Ann the importance of this special day of relationship and community building at his school – so that she could help highlight the continued importance of this privately funded program for the Falls Church City Education Foundation. As a rising 8th grader we expect that he will be a natural for the Be The Change You Want Club at the high school (where yes, the 8th graders now go in Falls Church).

A couple of weeks ago when Nate was out with friends, Jeremiah joined Carol Ann and me at home in watching the 1994 movie Forrest Gump, the dramatic comedy in which Tom Hanks brilliantly plays the role of a young man of quite limited intellect but real emotional intelligence who is steadfastly

loyal to those friends who accept him. A good part of that story is focused around Forrest's generally unrequited love for a troubled young woman who had been his loyal childhood friend and chum, Jenny.

As the movie opens, Forrest is sitting at a bus stop bench in the town where he has gone to see Jenny, once again, because after several years of no contact she has written to request that he visit. Forrest is recounting to total strangers his remarkable and larger-than-life life story up to that point, working up the courage to encounter Jenny again, wondering if his love will once again be spurned. As it turns out, Jenny has begun to raise the son Forrest unknowingly fathered the last time he saw her, but now Jenny has learned she has a terminal illness. Forrest is happy then to accept her back, to wed her, and finally to rear their son as a single Dad after Jenny's death. As the movie closes with him accompanying his bright little boy on the first day of school to the bus stop Forrest used at the same age, viewers are left with the clear impression that he is well equipped to do so because of the faithful, loving relationship his own mother offered to him. As she often told him, "life is like a box of chocolates, you never know exactly what you're going to get." Forrest has made his own peace with that as best he can.

Jeremiah was understandably unsettled by this movie, but primarily by his empathy for the character of Forrest, and the unfairness of Jenny's untimely death. He found it difficult to get to sleep that night, in touch with his desire for a broken world's healing.

This is a desire I believe God has placed in Jeremiah's heart, just as such a desire animated the ministry of Jesus, and motivated Jesus to offer healing to the woman with the spirit that had crippled her for 18 years until she found healing through his touch on the Sabbath. It is an impulse I associate with healing Christian faith communities like Seekers, where prophets who would be "repairers of the breach"

(Isaiah 58:12) are nurtured and supported.

Jesus public ministry began following his baptism by John and subsequent temptation in the wilderness. After that temptation, he chose to serve God, with all the challenge, healing and struggle that would bring.

And after the powers of domination that rule this broken, fallen world tried to put an end to Jesus' life, God's Spirit overcame Christ's execution on a cross through the loving power of resurrection.

On Pentecost, the movement that became the early church was born and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. Always in that early church, baptism was the way that believers were incorporated into the church, the outward sign of the spiritual reality of the Holy Spirit's guiding presence at the center of each believer's life. In Paul's metaphor, the church had become the new body of Christ at work in the world. Baptism has remained the ritual through which new members have officially been incorporated into that church universal.

According to one scholar, five dominant New Testament images capture the wonderful action of God on our behalf that takes place in baptism. First, baptism unites us with Christ and his work, baptizing us into both his death and resurrection. Second, baptism officially incorporates us into the church. Third, God bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is promised through repentance and baptism. Fourth, in baptism God forgives our sin and reconciles us – an understanding we can return to each time we celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist. Finally, in baptism God provides us with new birth and entry into new life as part of “the royal priesthood of the Spirit-filled community.”[1]

Thank you Seekers, for being part of that Spirit-filled royal priesthood, the faith community where Jeremiah and

Nathaniel first experienced the Spirit of Christian love.

I want to close with a quote that I hear as a challenge to all baptized Christians, and which I associate with the Call Theology of Church of the Savior and Seekers. It is often erroneously attributed to Nelson Mandela, but was actually written by Maryanne Williamson and is from her book, A Return to Love[2]:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

May we each find freedom from the fears that diminish the image of God in us. Amen.

[1] James F. White, Sacraments as God's Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983) pp. 35-41.

[2] (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), Chapter 7, Section 3, pp. 190-191.



