

St. Paul: On The Same page

for 08.31.14 Pentecost 12a

Day One: Jeremiah 15:15-21

Part One – the plea

¹⁵ O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors... ¹⁶Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. ¹⁷ I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. ¹⁸Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

I don't know how you imagine great men and women of faith to be, but if you think that "holy" people are serene, confident, calm and trusting, then you may have a shock in store. Jeremiah prays, in effect, "Lord, I did what you told me to do, and I got nothing but trouble. What's up?"

Have you ever felt that way – as if God is letting down his end of the deal?

You got a perfect attendance pin from Sunday School when you were a child. You attend a Bible class every week. You even read through the whole Bible once! You don't get drunk. You've never committed a crime. You try to be a good person. And yet you have not received the respect or recognition you deserve. Your plans have fallen through. And you watch less godly people prosper.

Jeremiah knew how you feel. It was God's plan to work through Jeremiah, but not through his success. God called him to a ministry that would be rejected, and he gave him the strength to serve even when he felt like he was failing. But Jeremiah's failure was actually God's success.

Pray with Jeremiah. God welcomes your prayers, even the whining ones. He suffers with you, enduring the wrongness of this sinful world. And he wants to hear and answer your prayer.

What complaint would you bring today?

Prayer: O Lord, a fake smile does not fool you. You know my troubles and fears. Lord, hear me as I lay them before you... Amen.

Day Two: Jeremiah 15:15-21

Part Two – the promise

¹⁹Therefore thus says the LORD:
*"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me. If
you utter what is precious, and not
what is worthless, you shall be as
my mouth...."*²⁰ And I will make
you to this people a fortified wall of
bronze; they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you to save you and
deliver you, declares the LORD.

²¹ I will deliver you out of the hand
of the wicked..."

We are willing to pour out our troubles on the Lord. Are we just as willing to hear his response?

When I feel overwhelmed, when I feel like my burden is just too heavy, I pray and I ask God to take some of the burden away. I expect my load to get lighter.

Better yet, I hope that God will give me a vacation. I pray for strength to get to some time of refreshment. But it doesn't always work that way.

God gives Jeremiah good news... at least, sort of good news. He does not invite him to retire from the battle – or to enjoy a vacation at a peaceful resort. Instead, he

promises that if Jeremiah stands with him, he will make him strong. He will give him words to speak.

He will not prevent Jeremiah from being attacked, but he will make him to stand strong against attack. All this is not to glorify Jeremiah, but to help Jeremiah to glorify God.

I know you would like to leave the battlefield for a while. You'd like to not have to visit the hospital. You'd like to not be worrying about your finances. You'd like to not have a contentious situation with your co-worker or your boss.

But God may not give you relief by taking you away from the problem, or by taking the problem away from you. Instead, he can give you the strength, the patience, the mercy and forgiveness to do his will in that place.

If we stand with the Lord, strength will be there. Where else could God's strength be, except the place where he wants you to use it?

Prayer: *O Lord, I am so weak. You know that by myself I cannot stand. But make me a wall against injustice and falsehood. Let me reflect your glory. Amen.*

Day Three: Romans 12:9-21

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Jeremiah prayed for punishment against those who had wronged him. That may seem harsh to us, but notice that he did not try to take justice into his own hands. Others may be called to administer justice, like the policeman or the judge.

When we think of good overcoming evil, we imagine a superhero defeating an evil mastermind. In our story telling, we picture the triumph of good happening with lots of explosions and death.

But we are called to overcome evil with good in

another way, by showing mercy, by reflecting God's love, even to those who seem like enemies.

Instead of being clothed with a bullet proof suit of brightly colored Spandex, we are called to be clothed with humility. Instead of having snappy comebacks and insults for the criminal mastermind, we are called to repay evil with good, and not to be wise in our own sight.

Who are your enemies? Maybe you should make a list. Not only foreign terrorists and local criminals. Who are you worried about harming you?

God says, these are the people you ought to feed and clothe and bless with kind deeds. And with your kindness you can make a greater difference than with your strength.

Prayer: *Dearest Jesus, sometimes I want you to come in anger and punish those who do so much wrong. At times I want to get revenge myself. But I pray, fill me with your love that overcomes anger and evil. Let me be an instrument of reconciliation. Amen.*

Day Four: Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised...* ²⁴ *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*

All three of our lessons for next Sunday are about being persecuted, oppressed, facing enemies or hardship. But what if your life seems peaceful? What if you don't have any "enemies" or crosses to bear?

It may seem like you have no opponents, no oppressors, but you actually do have an enemy who plots evil against you.

The comfortable things in your life can be like an anesthetic that dulls your awareness of the truth. Perhaps taking up your cross will mean looking beneath the easy surface to face the spiritual battle beneath.

If Satan has a plan of attack in your life (and you know he does), then what do you think it might be? If you were Satan, how would you seek to harm or deceive a person like yourself?

Are your blessings leading you to an unholy smugness? Do you find it too easy to look down on those who are struggling? Many of our blessings cause us to be busy with our things, with our friends, and with activities. Are those blessings demanding time away from worship or conversation with God?

Jesus says that those who follow him will lose the world but gain life. If you are a follower of Jesus, where can you see that battle in your life? As believers, we see it first in Jesus' own life. And not just a battle, but a victory! That's why our battle cry is this, "Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!"

Prayer: *Dearest Jesus, I am afraid to take up my cross, but I know that you have already conquered my enemy through your cross, and you are with me. Give me courage, Lord, to leave behind comfort and embrace the battle. Amen.*