

AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE & COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED

Jeremiah 1: 4-10; Luke 18: 9-14

A little while ago, in a former congregation, I preached on the very same two passages of scripture we just heard read. And I had two very different reactions from two congregants who wanted to talk to me afterwards...

First, there was Julio. Julio really resonated with the prophecy of Jeremiah. Let me read part of it again: "Now I have put my words in your mouth (God speaks into the prophet). Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down... to build and to plant." For Julio, this prophecy may have been about kingdoms and nations, but it was also about him. Julio had hit rock bottom after a massive problem with alcoholism and a spate of broken relationships where he had hurt a lot of people.

Julio had grown up in an abusive household and had tried to nurse the trauma of abuse through drink. But all of this came crashing down until he had lost everything and everyone. This prophecy, however, spoke to him in a way that gave some purpose to his personal journey. His life had to be plucked up and pulled down, because only then would he come to terms with what had happened to him and what he had done. He had to be humbled in order then to be opened up to the building and planting that had to begin again from the ground up. He was now in the process of what's called in 12 step programs: "Making amends." He was tracking down everyone he had hurt along the way and also seeking to make peace with his family after a time of truth-telling, whether they were ready to hear it or not. Without the plucking up and pulling down there was no genuine way to build and to plant for healthy growth to happen.

Julio also resonated with the gospel reading and totally identified with the tax collector. The tax collector had done a lot of bad things in his life. Who knows how he got there. But taking responsibility for his life and accepting accountability was essential for him to then experience the overwhelming mercy of God as Jesus proclaims it. Only those who humble themselves will be exalted, Jesus says. This was gospel balm to Julio's broken soul on a journey of healing toward resurrecting wholeness!

But then there was Celine. Celine was an important member of the congregation with her husband a prominent elder. Both were also very generous donors to the congregation and generous with their time as well as their money when it came to serving in outreach projects. But Celine would always take issue with me, respectfully, when it came to all of us humans being put into the same category of sinner. When she heard the prophecy of Jeremiah she saw those kingdoms, nations and people who needed the plucking up and pulling down to be those others against whom we good people were contending. The world was divided between those

who are trying to do good and make a difference for good where they can, and those who are plucking up and pulling down what is good for their own selfish, hateful and greedy purposes. In the end, God would deal with them justly and God would reward the righteous for their faithfulness.

And why, Celine asked me, Is Jesus so hard on the Pharisee in the parable? The Pharisee lives right, he is generous with his money and he practices his religion faithfully. Imagine if everyone lived that way rather than the way of the tax collector, stealing from and abusing his own people and now seeking God's mercy. Jesus could help him far better by pointing to the example of the Pharisee and challenging the tax collector to make amends to all those he has hurt. He should take some lessons from the Pharisee in how to be a good person.

And yet, Celine said further, I had preached that Jeremiah and Jesus proclaimed their greatest condemnation against those who were both righteous and religious. Why would anyone be motivated and encouraged to practice goodness and generosity then? It's fine for some people we help in the church who come seeking help and forgiveness for whatever they have fallen into in life and whatever they have done. But don't we need the good people to help model for them the way they should live? Sin must be judged and people need to feel the sting of what they have done wrong rather than be let off the hook too easily by proclamations of mercy and forgiveness.

And goodness must be rewarded. People need to be held up and honoured for being righteous and faithful. Both Jeremiah and Jesus seem thin on any reward for goodness and Jesus, at least, is way too soft on sinners coming on their knees seeking mercy without evidence of having done anything substantial to atone for their sins. Well, I will try to reproduce the answers I would have given to both Julio and Celine who continued to be part of the congregation.

And on this Reformation Sunday, let me begin with Martin Luther, considered the father of the Protestant Reformation. Luther grew up in the world of late medieval Europe. It was a world ruled by the power of a global superpower – the church. The church was the most powerful institution across all of Europe and individual nation states were seeking the favour of the church to survive and thrive. So how did the church keep its power? Well, for one thing, the church had a vast army ready to be used in any battle in favour of whatever alliance it chose. But even more profoundly, the church got into the minds and souls of people so that people lived in fear of judgement and the fires of hell. Everyone was a sinner doomed to hell, and the only way out of such a fate was through the forgiveness offered by the church.

Was there any grace for human imperfection? Not without the church. People were responsible for every thought and action, and God held everyone to account for a high standard of obedience to God's laws as the church taught them with its interpretation of the bible plus tradition. Unless you submitted to the sacraments of the church and donated to the

church generously, you and your loved ones were doomed, not only in this life, but in the life to come. Your spirit beyond this life was held in the balance and the church needed to keep praying for your soul even after you died. It fell on your family and relatives to the next generation to keep up with the faith, devotion and financial contribution to the church.

Well, but what if you questioned such beliefs? And what if such questioning spread like wildfire so that people all around started questioning such beliefs too? What would happen to the power and wealth of the church? You can understand then, why reformers like Luther who not only protested such abuse of power, but also discovered and then proclaimed an alternative gospel vision, became a serious security threat to be silenced.

But Luther was fortunate in that the territory he lived in was governed by a local ruler who was also keen to be freed from the grip of the church for financial and political reasons as much as spiritual ones. This meant that someone like Luther who could undermine the grip of the church over the people was a valuable asset to be protected and given a voice. And so, where other reformers before Luther were silenced by imprisonment, torture and execution, Luther was given full protection and freedom to teach, write and spread a gospel of liberation from fear and embrace of a God who is love above any judgement.

For Luther, the big discovery was in the word "Grace." Before Luther, Grace was understood in this way. You as a human being must do your best to be a good person, and God honours your best by completing your imperfection. That's Grace. Grace tops up your human effort. OK, but who judges whether your human effort is enough? Is it ever enough? Only the church can decide that through confession and the sacraments. The church has to pluck you up and pull you down before it can then build you up as Jeremiah prophesies. You have to come like the tax collector, recognizing your sin for all your efforts, and only then can the church as emissary of Christ, offer you mercy and Grace. The Pharisee also needs Grace, but not in the same way. He just needs to be a little kinder to the poor tax collector who has already come on his knees. He doesn't need to be pulled down even further. He already is.

Well, The Spirit awakened Luther to a whole other reading of scripture, and a whole other understanding of Grace. Can we ever earn the Grace of God's mercy with all our good deeds? Is our heart ever totally pure? Should we receive only what we deserve in measured and calculated amounts? And who determines that? Luther was a genuine and honest soul. He felt that even his best efforts were always tainted with desperation to be accepted and loved rather than judged and condemned. He felt that despite any goodness and compassion in him, there was also anger, resentment, envy and despair. He could get petty at times and certain people could trigger him in ways that brought up nasty feelings in him, forcing him to keep seeking God's mercy rather than a pat on the back. What a torturous way to live!

But then, he re-read passages of scripture like the ones we have this morning. The goal of any plucking up and pulling down was to build and to plant on a new foundation. God's goal through the prophet was to create a new heart that received love and shared such love not out of compulsion or fear, but out of freedom, a freedom that didn't have to hide or be ashamed of imperfection. We deal with our sin daily, but do so out of a larger acceptance and Grace that is ours from the get-go. I want to love more sincerely not because otherwise I will be damned to hell. No. I want to love more sincerely because I experience through my faith that I am loved totally and completely despite my imperfection. How then can I fail to love myself or another person even when I have to hold them to account for their sin or be honest with them about how they may trigger me in negative ways? I am loved for all my flaws on a journey of healing toward wholeness. How then can I be so unforgiving to someone else who also needs the healing of love toward wholeness?

And even if we have not committed sin as severe as the tax collector, his situation, ironically, positions him to seek out the mercy of God and therefore experience the abundant Grace of God too. The Pharisee's failing is not his faithfulness and generous giving. No. His failing is one of love. His heart is ready to judge. It's hardened. He actually believes he has earned a place in God's heart rather than opening himself in humble need to recognize how much he, like the Tax Collector, also needs the Grace of God to cleanse and liberate his soul. Hmm... But would he ever get there? Or would he always need to feel more deserving and worthy than the tax collector as assurance for his self-righteous heart?

Celine did come around over time. It happened as there were situations in her aging where she shared with me profound insecurities about her own self-worth. Was she ever good enough? So much of her effort to be a good person and her need to compare herself to others who were not so good, was an effort to earn her worth and favour with God and with others. But life can humble you and growing old can humble you too as some of us are especially aware.

But as Celine was plucked up and pulled down by the circumstances of life, some building and planting began to happen, and humble gratitude and Grace filled her heart... She was especially appreciative of all the staff around her in care and hospital settings, and especially, as she said, those who quietly came to clean her room and empty the trash... Who takes the time to thank and acknowledge them?

Grace and gratitude, not judgement, feeling the love, the acceptance and the abundance and peace that come with that; that is the heart of the message that began to spread like wildfire with the Protestant Reformation. And out of all that, we Protestant Christians were born. But like everyone else, we, too, need to be plucked up and pulled down regularly from all the toxic falsity and negativity that builds up in us toward others and ourselves. We need to come again and again with fresh appreciation and humble gratitude to the Grace and mercy of God, so that we can be built up refreshed and renewed in a Love that never fades or fails... To God be the glory now and evermore... Amen.