

*Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York  
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York  
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor*

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 17A – August 30, 2020*

*Jeremiah 15:15-21*

*Romans 12:1-8*

*Psalm 26:1-8*

*Matthew 16:21-28*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

The lessons we have to consider today are all about being human. First, there's poor Jeremiah. He'd responded when God called him to be a prophet and he'd lived a very lonely existence to be obedient to God. He lived in isolation – because God told Jeremiah not to marry, not to have children, not even to socialize at community celebrations. And the word of the Lord that he preached was a new and unusual message to the people of Judah about their individual responsibility for sins, not just the community's accountability. He had to deal with insults, persecution and rejection from the people he lived among. After all, who wanted to hear his message of failure; who wanted to be told that they needed to repent and change their ways or face destruction?

Jeremiah was weary, and finally he just gave up – he rejected his call in lonely frustration and poured out his heart to God.

But God didn't silence Jeremiah. God didn't attempt to convince him that things were other than how he thought they were. God just called Jeremiah to repentance. With that command, came God's promise that Jeremiah would be restored to his work as a prophet; to his work as God's mouthpiece. And God assured Jeremiah that he would be strengthened to be able to withstand anything and everything that people would do to oppose him. God promised to uphold Jeremiah and to redeem him from any hostility that he might face. That's how God dealt with the frailties of Jeremiah the human being.

And then there's Jesus and Peter. Peter made his astounding, divinely-inspired confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, that we considered last week. And since that declaration, Jesus continued to talk about how he had to go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief

priests and scribes and be killed. On the third day, he said, he would be raised from the dead. (MT 16:21.)

I wonder if Peter even heard that last part – about Jesus being raised from the dead after the third day. And what was Peter’s response? So human. “Oh, don’t say that, Jesus. God forbid it!”

Jesus wasn’t too happy to hear this from his prize disciple. And his response also was very human: he said, “Get behind me Satan!” (You may recall that in Hebrew “*Satan*” means “tempter.”) So, Jesus felt tempted by Peter’s encouragement to not think about the pain, torture, crucifixion and death that he would be facing. That’s pretty human, too. He was trying to get his human self to move toward Jerusalem and his willing acceptance of the destruction of that human self without falling apart. And his main man, Peter, was being all too human. He seems to have lost that divine connection to the truth that he had expressed – at least for the moment.

Maybe Peter’s response comes out of anticipating what life would be like without Jesus there with the disciples, day after day. Peter wouldn’t have wanted to lose Jesus’ friendship, companionship and leadership. It doesn’t seem that Jesus is really blaming Peter for his comment – maybe he just needs Peter to be supportive so that he can get through the next few weeks. God created us to be human and God declared our humanness to be good.

Jesus had brought new life to people with his new teachings. But he’d been a thorn in the side of officials all his life. His mere existence as an infant was a threat to King Herod, Rome’s client king, to such an extent that Herod was willing to murder all boy children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem to assure the death of the one who might someday challenge his claim to the throne of Judah. Herod could rely on the chief priests and scribes to cooperate with his murderous agenda. (MT 2:16.)

Three decades later, the chief priests and scribes conspired with Judas Iscariot to arrest Jesus and hand him over to Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea and the Emperor’s representative, claiming that he was guilty of sedition. Although Pilate found no fault with Jesus, he sensed that a riot was about to start, and sentenced Jesus to death.

Jesus was seen as a revolutionary leader trying to prepare his colonized people for his death; the death of their Messiah, chosen by God to bring them freedom. That was especially the case since so many people still didn't understand what he was saying about loving others as they loved God and themselves. No, it wasn't easy for Jesus to live with his human self, any more than it's easy for any of us.

So Jesus had to explain again about what being his follower involved. That wasn't easy, either. To be Jesus's follower, a person has to deny him or herself and take up his or her cross. And what does that mean? Well, if we want to keep living the lives we have, we'll not really live lives of much value – in other words, we'll lose life. But if we are killed because of our faith in and our loyalty to Jesus, we'll find eternal life. Did those first disciples know what eternal life meant?

Do we know what it means?

Jesus described the *basilaiou* of God, the “kingdom” of heaven, in his first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. It's the kind of human existence for which he was incarnated and came to earth to bring through his public ministry; his calling was to create the kingdom on earth so that humans could see how life would look in God's kingdom. It's a society in which the oppressed receive good news; the brokenhearted are bound up; liberty is proclaimed to captives and prisoners are released. *Cf*, Isa 61:1a. That is, the earthly society that reflects the kingdom of heaven is a place of freedom, joy, and abundance.

That is the kind of existence we are called to help bring to earth as well, so that people live in justice, with plenty of all of the necessities of life.

And what is the means to achieve that kingdom of God? Paul tells us that in the portion of his letter to the Romans that we heard today: it's love.

“Let love be genuine; ... hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ... [B]e ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (Romans 12:9-13.)

So, in our communities of faith, we are encouraged to bring love to bear in all of our relationships and interactions. And there's more to this "love commandment."

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
 ...Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14, 17-19, 21.)

We are living in a time when many feel persecuted. Paul urges us to bless the persecutors; to overcome evil with good. This is as great a challenge for us today as it was for the first disciples. They had to accept that Jesus would be killed by the authorities. We have to find ways to work together, both with like-minded people and with those with whom we vehemently disagree, to pull our country – and the world – out of the corona pandemic.

We also have the challenge of bringing peace to our country, both with active participation in the general election, and then, no matter who wins, of finding ways that we can work together for the peaceful future and the recovery of our country's economy – so that all may share in the abundance God has given us. And we face the challenge of rejoining the community of nations.

Even though the challenges are great, we know what the outcome of that future was for the first disciples. God resurrected Jesus in three days.

And God is with us still, working in and through us, to accomplish the realm of heaven. The only way we will be able to do that is, as Paul told the Romans, through love. Not emotion. Not the chemistry of mutual attraction. Love, as Paul describes it, our being intentional about blessing persecutors, never avenging a wrong, providing food and drink for our enemies. Maybe we can develop this behavior by reading this portion of Paul's lesson every day to focus our hearts and minds.

Like Jeremiah, if we commit ourselves to bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth through loving all, we can rely on God to strengthen us to be able to withstand anything and everything that people will do to oppose us. God's steadfast faithfulness to Jeremiah extends to us, as well, to redeem us from all of the hostilities that we face. That's how God has dealt with the frailties of human beings for millennia, and that's how God will continue to uphold us and our humanity. When we fear that we are falling or losing step, we need only reach out for God's steadying hand and love.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen