

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 23, 2018
Jeremiah 11:18-20
“The One Judging Righteously”

Our text is the cry of Jeremiah, surrounded by those who plot to take his life. But it's worse than that. Reading through the rest of chapter 11, you find that it's the villagers of Anathoth who plot against him. Anathoth was set aside by God for the Levites—for the priests of Israel; therefore, as the prophet of God declares God's Word, it is the priests of the land who are plotting his death.

It's even worse than that. Read chapter 1, and you find out that Anathoth is Jeremiah's hometown. These aren't just priests of the land: these are neighbors, maybe kinsmen who want him dead and gone. You'd expect better from family and friends. No such luck for Jeremiah.

Could it possibly be worse? Yes. Jeremiah declares in our text that he didn't know that they were plotting against him. Whether it was naiveté or miscalculation or complete treachery by his hometown, Jeremiah is apparently in far more hot water than he expected.

And what's the reason for the animosity? Things are better around Anathoth than they used to be. This is after Josiah's reign, and Josiah started to put Judah back on track, back on the way to worship of the one true God. He called for repentance and restoration of the temple. The priests of Anathoth must have known all about it. But there's still need for more: that's Jeremiah's proclamation. In fact, Josiah's reforms are slipping away. God has called Jeremiah to sound the alarm, and the priests of Anathoth don't want to hear it. Maybe they didn't like Josiah's reforms in the first place. Maybe they've taken enough heat that they've abdicated faithfulness and just don't want to deal with it anymore. Whatever the reason, they devise their schemes against Jeremiah saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit.” The fruit of any prophet is his prophecies, his words: destroy the tree, and the speaking stops.

We want to note a few things about Jeremiah in our text. First, one would imagine that he faces a heavy temptation to make peace with his hometown, for a prophet is always without honor there. Maybe he's tempted to quiet down a little bit or bend God's Word to shape it to their liking. However, Jeremiah continues to do the prophet's work that God has given him to do. Given the anguish he often expresses in this book and Lamentations, this really is quite remarkable—especially in our current day, when emotions often win an argument. Jeremiah resists the temptations and continues to speak what the Lord has made known to him.

Second, he goes in unarmed. He goes like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. He has no escort of armed guards or even the luxury of a few tough guys to glare at people. He doesn't get to intimidate people to keep them a step back while he gives his message: all he has to go on is the Word that the Lord has entrusted to him. No sword—just the Word of God.

Third, Jeremiah prays for vengeance—but remember, he has nothing but the Word of God. Vengeance isn't his to dole out: "Vengeance is Mine," says the Lord." Therefore, while Jeremiah may desire vengeance on those who oppose him, he doesn't devise any schemes himself: he entrusts that to the Lord: "But, O LORD of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You I have committed my cause" (Jeremiah 11:20). Jeremiah confesses that he is God's messenger—and those who oppose him are angry at the message. Their fight is with God's Word, and Jeremiah is only repeating them. Messengers represent their kings—and to strike a messenger is to strike the king whom he represents. Therefore, Jeremiah leaves the vengeance to God. It's not the messenger's task to carry out the king's vengeance: that is the calling of the king. It's the messenger's job to deliver the message, in the hope that hearers will abide by the king's decrees.

Fourth, as the King's messenger, Jeremiah has the unique privilege of foreshadowing Jesus. He may be like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter, but he is not the Lamb led to the slaughter. That is left to the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

You hear Jesus say as much in the Gospel lesson for today. He's been working miracles left and right, and He's just been transfigured on the mountaintop before Peter, James and John. Things are looking like they'll only get better...and then Jesus drops the bomb: "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And when He is killed, after three days He will rise" (Mark 9:31). Normally when I read that text, I'm stuck on the revelation that the disciples don't understand, and then have the audacity to go on and argue about which one of them is the greatest. In other words, the disciples are being very un-Jeremiah-like. Jesus, however, is on the road to the same situation. The priests are plotting against Him: not the priests of little ol' Anathoth, but the ones in Jerusalem. He speaks the truth, and they don't want to hear it. He is the Prophet delivering God's saving message, and they want to destroy this Tree with its fruit. He is God Himself and He could easily defend Himself with force; yet He goes to the "showdown" with them as a gentle Lamb led to the slaughter—as the Passover Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world. And where He could destroy them with one word, instead He will remain silent and allow Himself to be slaughtered on the cross. For their sins. For your sins.

The one on the cross is the Lord of hosts in human flesh, the same one in our Jeremiah text. He judges righteously, and He will condemn the sinner. But before that Judgment, He endures judgment. He dies for the sins of the world. He suffers His Father's righteous judgment for sin, God's vengeance against evil—so that all who believe in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life.

That is the Savior whom Jeremiah proclaims and represents in our Old Testament lesson.

He is your Savior, too. Jesus judges righteously, as Jeremiah prays. But before righteously judging you for your sin, He takes your unrighteousness upon Himself and suffers that judgment on the cross. Having suffered the sentence for your unrighteousness already, He pardons you

and declares you righteous. Thus, He judges you: He announces the verdict of “not guilty,” and says that the kingdom of heaven is yours.

The Church does well to learn lessons from Jeremiah. We live in a time where Christianity is losing influence in culture, and where many have arisen who oppose the Christian faith, claiming it to be everything from utter foolishness to hate speech to child abuse. More and more as we seek to treasure the faith and proclaim it to the world around us, we find ourselves in a similar place as Jeremiah. The Lord has given us the honor of proclaiming His Word to a world that increasingly does not want to hear it; and, in fact, opposing Christianity is gaining mainstream popularity. Yet this does not drive us to silence or compromise: recognizing the blindness that comes with unbelief, we want to proclaim the truth that makes eyes see and hearts believe. Thus we follow the lessons of Jeremiah. For one thing, we hold to the Savior’s Word and speak it in its truth and purity. Obscuring God’s Word or compromising may bring some relief for us from those who oppose it; but it will not bring them relief from their sin.

For another thing, we enter into this battle only with the Word of God. Jeremiah didn’t carry a sword to force people to hear or believe, and neither do we. There are reasons for this, including the simple truth that you can’t force people to hear or believe. But perhaps more important is this: forgiveness is a gift of God, and you never force gifts on anyone. Instead of forcing, you give; and we give out God’s gifts of forgiveness and life by speaking. The idea of forcing conversion is a doctrine of false religions, such as Islam; and when it has been taught by the Church, it has only proven that the Church has departed from God’s Word. It creeps around American Christianity with the idea that we can make a nation “Christian” by means of passing good laws to govern the land. Don’t misunderstand: good laws which reflect God’s Law are far better than bad laws which do not; but laws have never made anyone a Christian. Only the Gospel does: the Gospel that our Lord entrusts to us, His Church, to speak.

A third lesson from Jeremiah is this: Christians face opposition in this world, be it actual physical attack or unkind letters to the editor. No matter the opposition, it hurts and stings and will provoke anger. Should we face such opposition, we do not seek vengeance. Rather, we commend such people to the Lord and ask that He would judge them righteously. How He does so is up to Him. We pray that it would include their repentance and belief in Jesus, so that the Lord in His righteous judgment might judge them righteous. If they persist in unbelief, though, we leave it to the Lord to break and hinder their counsel and will. As His messengers, it is not given to us to work vengeance: it is only given to us to proclaim life in His name.

Finally, the fourth lesson: unlike Jeremiah, we don’t foreshadow Jesus because He has already come. But God grant that our proclamation always points to Jesus. Current evangelism strategies today often say that the Church should reach out to the world with other messages first, then follow with the Gospel. This presents the very real danger that the Church might become fixated on the other message, or that those to whom it speaks may never hear the Gospel. May the Lord, in His mercy, grant that every visitor hear the Gospel at St John and depart having heard that his sins are forgiven. They could die that day. We may never see them again; but the seed has been planted, and we leave it to the Holy Spirit to work the faith.

Our Old Testament lesson clearly has much to say to the Church as a whole about proclaiming the Gospel to a world that does not want to hear; but there is also application here for individual Christians, too. The devil likes to take the gifts of God which give you the most happiness and use them to turn you against God. Our Old Testament lesson points us to an aspect of this: friends, loved ones and family whom we hold dear, but who do not believe in Jesus or have chosen to live in unrepentant sin.

This is a painful one, because you dearly want them repentant, forgiven and confident of their salvation; and as time goes on, expect the devil to turn the screws. You'll be tempted to grow impatient with God, and to question whether or not His Word really is powerful and effective. You'll also be tempted to tinker with God's Word, to rewrite it so that it makes room for the sins of the one for whom you care. You'll be tempted to believe that God's not up to the job, so saving others must be up to you. You may even be tempted to leave the faith yourself so that you might be at peace with the other; I have spoken with people who desperately wanted to be forgiven and in heaven, but they refused to repent because a loved one had already died outside the faith. Be forewarned: Satan understands how much we value our relationships with other people; and if he can use those to drive a wedge between you and your Savior, he'll be happy to do so. If he succeeds, now two of you are lost.

Against these temptations, you have the words of Jeremiah. You know that the Gospel is the message that the Lord has entrusted to your lips; and while there will be all sorts of pressure to bend it or abandon it, only the Gospel is the power of salvation for all who believe. Changing the Lord's message might bring peace with others temporarily, but it destroys peace between you and God. Therefore, you hold fast to the message.

You also acknowledge that, with the message, you're just the messenger. You have no sword to compel anyone, and—even when your motives are the most noble and sincere—you can force no one to believe. This means that you don't rely on yourself to convert people: rather, you entrust them to the Lord who saves. You pray for them. He saves by His Word, and it is given to you to speak His Word now, while you have breath. Should those you love not listen now, it may be the Lord's Word spoken at your funeral which comforts them in their mourning and brings them to repentance and faith.

From Jeremiah, you know that your desire that someone have forgiveness and life may not be well received. Different beliefs can account for a lot of awkward silences at get-togethers. This doesn't mean that the Lord has failed in His Word; it simply means that sin resists Christ and the life that He gives. Thus, you pray that the Lord would judge righteously: especially, if it be His will, that those who do not believe might repent, so that the Lord might judge them righteous for Jesus' sake.

This is all about Jesus, for He is the One who saves. He is the One who was led as the gentle Lamb to be slaughtered for the sins of the world, for the sins of those whom you love, and for your sins, too—so that you might be saved from that condemnation. Dear friends, this is a darkened world; but Christ has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. By the

waters of Holy Baptism, He has cleansed you of your sin and made you righteous. By His Word and Supper, He continues to forgive your sins and strengthen your faith. His Word still saves, and He graciously places it in our ears and mouths. Take heart, for you are the Lord's; and there is no better news than that you are judged righteous for Jesus' sake, that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen