

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; Luke 15:1-10; I Timothy 1:12-19

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 is a dark prophecy against Israel/Judah, a word that essentially proclaims, “A nation reaps what it has sown!”

This prophecy against Judah comes as “a hot wind from God out of the bare heights in the desert toward the poor people – a wind that will not willow or cleanse”. This wind is the breath, the word of God to them! And what is that word?

It is first a political and military word. Jeremiah 4:19-22 describes a nation that is reaping the inevitable consequence of its policies that sought to build political and military power, economic wealth and domination of the region, but which had resulted in systems that oppressed, exploited and sought to control the people. Jeremiah describes the consequences of such policies – armies sweeping down upon Judah, bringing it to the point of extinction. He cries out for Israel, “The whole land is laid waste (by the marauding army); suddenly my tents (that is, the tents of the Jewish army and in particular, the tents of the king and Israel’s nobility) are destroyed, my curtains in a moment. How long must I see the standard (or flag of the enemy nation) and hear the sound of the trumpet (of the enemy army calling them to the annihilation of the Israelite army)” (4:20b-21).

Why must Judah face such defeat on the battlefield? Why must their political, economic and religious leaders and systems suffer conquest? “For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good” (vs. 22). Israel as a nation, and the leaders of that nation must suffer such profound defeat because they have not followed God’s intentions for the nation. Rather, they succumbed to the temptations of greed, the lust for power and the need to dominate, and as a result have become an oppressive, exploitive and controlling political and economic force. And now they are reaping the oppression they have sown. They have been skilled in doing evil and have thus lost the capacity to do good. “They do not know me” – no longer seeking or maintaining a dynamic, vital and obedient relationship with God. Thus, the inevitable has now happened to them. Now the oppressors are themselves becoming oppressed by others, the exploiters have become the exploited, the dominators are now being dominated themselves.

But this does not conclude Jeremiah’s analysis of the evil that the policies of Judah’s kings, nobility, business leaders and priests have brought upon the nation. The prophet continues, “I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger” (vss. 22, 26). Jeremiah 4:23-28 is a description of ecological disaster. It is not only that the policies that the leadership of Judah followed brought the destructive wrath of other nations down upon them. It was that these very policies had led to an ecological disaster of unimaginable consequences.

Jeremiah’s use of words in describing this disaster are carefully chosen. He tells the reader that, because of the acted-out policies of Israel’s elite, the earth had become “waste and void” This phrase, “waste and void” is in Hebrew *tohu wabohu* – the exact Hebrew words used to describe

the origins of the earth itself in Genesis 1:2! Then Jeremiah continues his use of the account of the creation of the world that appears in the first creation story by noting “the heavens had no light” (Gen. 1:3-5).

Jeremiah is intentionally comparing the chaos at the creation of the world with the chaos that will occur after Judah’s destruction as a nation. Israel will bring about a second chaos. But the difference is that the first chaos was an integral step in God’s creative process, while the second chaos is caused by humanity polluting and destroying their environment. And they will pollute the world upon which they depend to sustain life because of their greed, their lust after money, and their compulsion to build power for its own sake. Whereas the first chaos was part of God’s design in the process of the creation of the world, the second chaos is the result of humanity’s greed, hunger for power and the need to dominate.

The message that Jeremiah gives clearly to the political, economic and religious leaders of Judah is that God will not rescue them from the consequences of their own lustful greed. The policies of the powerful, seeking only their own security and strength, will lead to a thorough destruction not only of their nation, but of their country as well. Not only will their cities be pillaged by other nations, but also their land will experience a vast ecological disaster. For the political, economic and religious powers of the nation and the ordinary people who embrace their policies for their own security and wealth will reap what they sow. “Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black, for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back”, says the Lord God (vs. 28). This is the inevitable result of those who would serve only mammon!

Psalm 14 begins, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good” (vs. 1). But then the psalmist continues, thus amplifying his argument. “The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one” (vss. 2-3)!

There are those who are, through-and-through, evil. But the fact is that no one is truly good. Even one who is called in scripture “a man after God’s own heart” (as was King David) can act in indescribably evil ways!

“Evildoers” are given several titles in Psalm 14, which in its naming, describes the breadth of their sin. They are “godless” (vs. 1), “corrupt” (vs. 1), “not good” (vs. 1), “perverse” (vs. 3), “evildoers” (vs. 4). They deny the existence of God by their actions, even when they might affirm God with their lips. Because they deny God in their lives, they have no ground of being and therefore abuse and exploit those most vulnerable (vss. 5-6). But, worst of all, such evil people are not occasional nor are they the exception to the rule. Rather, they are everybody (“there is no one who does good, no, not one” vs. 3b)!

What is being expressed here is one of the dark but profoundly true convictions throughout scripture – the reality of total human depravity! A consistent biblical assertion is the capacity for evil that lies in even the very best of us humans!

Total depravity is the biblical belief that sin permeates all that we do and are. Sin, like a virus, permeates every part of us – our body, our soul, our mind, our will – and everything we create – our relationships with others, our families, our labor, our schooling, our neighborhood, our church, our city, our culture, the world! It is not that we can't act in good ways or even have good motives. It is not that we can't act in a noble manner or to seek justice – for we can. But it is that none of us ever acts out of a purely benevolent motivation; there is always a little bit of us that act out of selfishness or wanting the advantage or to serve our own ends. Sin permeates everything that we do.

Because depravity permeates all that we are and do and thus is “total”, we are unable to do anything to bring about our salvation. We can be made right *with* God only *by* God! Our good deeds, our obedience to the Law of God, our performance of the proper rituals and worship, even our best intentions can't make us right with God. Even our own faith, if it is not created by the grace of God, can't make us right with God because it is therefore our good work. Sin so permeates all that we are and all that we do that it stands between us and God. Therefore, only God can act to save us!

With even the best of us totally depraved, what hope is there, then, for us? The Psalmist begins to hint at an answer to such a desperate question. “O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad” (vs. 7). The only redemption lies in “Zion”; the only redemption for us all and for all human society rests in God's saving action!

Luke 15:1-10 contains the first two of three parables told in Luke 15, the third being the story of the Prodigal Son. However, it is the first two parables – the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coins – that is our focus in the Gospel Lesson for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Although these three stories are choice stories, each capable of standing on its own, it is the context that unites them in a common message. The chapter begins, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming next to Jesus to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”” (15:1-2). These parables, therefore, are Jesus' response to this criticism leveled against him by the religious and political leaders of his day.

It is important to understand the issue that is at stake here. Jesus attracts to himself “the tax collectors and sinners”, while his teachings and life-style acts as an offense to “Pharisees and the scribes”. He is embraced by the most marginalized in society, but is resented and criticized by the powerful. The term “tax collectors and sinners” was an expression used throughout the Gospels for those who are the very dregs of Jewish society.

A “sinner” was a technical term that was not used of anyone who commits sin (after all, in that sense all of us – even Pharisees and scribes – would be “sinners”). In the Hebrew culture, a “sinner” was someone whose occupation or vocation would, by its very nature, cause him to

break the Mosaic Law or to work outside the Law. So, for example, anyone who raised pigs or worked on the Sabbath or was a prostitute would have been a “sinner”; this is a person whose occupation caused that person to continually break at least one of the laws of the Torah.

The other term used was “tax collector”. A tax collector, of course, was precisely what the words say it was – someone who gathered the taxes owed to the Roman and Jewish governments. But a tax collector was particularly despised in Israelite culture because he was both one who openly and continuously consorted with Rome (it was Rome for which he collected taxes) and was legally allowed to skim from those taxes a handsome profit for himself. The tax collector, therefore, was not poor, but was immensely despised by the people in spite of his being rather wealthy because he was a quisling.

Therefore, what Luke is telling his readers was that Jesus most cared about and ministered to the most despised and marginalized people in Israelite society, and was consequently embraced by them. Likewise, he was a threat and a “clear and present danger” to those who were at the top of their society, and who operated that society for their own benefit. Therefore, the powerful grumbled at every embrace by Jesus of the powerless. To battle Jesus and to lessen his impact upon the people, the Pharisees and scribes sought to undermine his credibility by heaping criticism upon him. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”, they declared both to each other and to the crowds, hoping that such criticism would ostracize him from the people.

However, the criticism they leveled at Jesus in order to undermine him was, in reality, the highest of compliments. Yes, indeed, he did welcome sinners and eat with them. In the ancient Near East, those with whom one ate were an indication of one’s social position, economic status and religious boundaries. Those with whom you ate, by your very act of eating with them, made a declaration of your political, economic and religious priorities and, consequently, your very position in society. No rich man would eat with a poor person, for in so doing, his status would be reduced to that beggarly man. No politically powerful or well-placed individual would eat with a peasant for fear of being downgraded in the eyes of his contemporaries. No Pharisee or priest, ostentatiously following the Law, would eat with a “sinner” for fear of being also made unclean. Those with whom you ate set your station in life. So for the Pharisees to say of Jesus, “He welcomes sinners and eats with them” was to say, “This man may call himself a rabbi and a teacher of the Law, but he is a charlatan who ought to be shunned and not allowed to teach because he eats with sinners who, by their very presence with him, automatically makes him unclean!”

Thus, there are two primary themes running through Luke 15. First, Jesus is on trial, informally, before those who sit at the very pinnacle of their society, and use that position for their own aggrandizement. He is being challenged to defend his practices on behalf of the poor. Second, Jesus turns the tables on these powerful leaders of Israel, exposing their hypocrisy in not caring about the poor (and, thus, breaking the Law) and challenging them to join with him in both identifying with the poor and to use their positions to turn the economy, politics and religious practices of their country upside-down, so that the poor and the powerless can be prized as people, and that justice would begin at the dining table.

The first parable that seeks to accomplish the second purpose is Jesus' story of a shepherd who was caring for a hundred sheep. When rounding the sheep up in order to bed them down for the night, he discovers that one of the sheep is missing. He thus leaves the 99 sheep and goes after the one who is lost. Finding him, he brings the lost sheep home and then gathers his friends for a party, declaring, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost" (vs. 6). Jesus then concludes the parable with the words, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (vs. 7).

Jesus, of course, is not suggesting that the Pharisees and scribes are "righteous persons who need no repentance". But they think they don't need to repent. They are so caught up in their obedience of the details of the Law that they can't perceive how much they despise the poor who are also made in God's image nor change their ways to free the poor from the practices of the political, economic and religious structures of their society that presently oppress, exploit and dominate the poor.

The second parable continues the theme of the lost being found. In this parable, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. The "ten silver coins" is likely a reference to this woman's life savings; the custom was to wear such coins woven on a band around one's head or on a chain around the woman's neck. What Jesus was implying was that the band or chain broke, the coins spilt across the floor, and after she had frantically gathered them up, she found one missing. So what does she do? She sweeps the floor of the house, looking carefully for that coin which likely had fallen into a corner or into a crack in the floor. She finds it, and then calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost" (v. 9)! Jesus then ends the parable, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (vs. 10).

The message is essentially the same as in the first parable. But so is the challenge to the powerfully positioned in that society who had been so critical of Jesus. "Come and eat with the sinners", Jesus is challenging them. "And if you do, and allow yourself to be open to them, you will find a new purpose and direction for your life that will change your priorities and will become politically, economically and spiritually liberating to those whom you formerly scorned and rejected!"

Will the Pharisees and scribes respond to Jesus' challenge? Will we?

I Timothy 1:12-17 is the apostle's testimony to the mercy he has received from God.¹ His statement is one of profound gratitude for what God has done for him.

¹ It has long been debated by biblical scholars whether Paul the Apostle is the author of this pastoral epistle, or whether someone at a later date was writing in Paul's name to preserve Paul's theological legacy (a common practice in the first-century Roman Empire). There are strong arguments on both sides; I would refer you to William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), pp. xiii-13 if you wish to explore these arguments. However, for the purposes of writing commentary for this lectionary, I will write as if Paul is the author of the book.

“I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1:12-17).

It is notable in this passage Paul’s perception of free will and divine grace. It was his actions for which he must assume responsibility. Everything that he has done that is evil and that contributed to his separation from God and God’s intentions for the world is that for which he must now assume responsibility. He was a “blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence”, and this, in turn, made him “the foremost of sinners”.

Immediately before the writing of his testimony, Paul had listed the actions that separate people from God – murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, the lawless and disobedient, the godless and sinful, those who kill their father or mother (I Tim. 1:9-10). But next to sins such as these, Paul’s acts of blasphemy, persecution and violence against the church of Christ (and, therefore, the living Body of Christ) was far greater.

Why were Paul’s acts against the church of greater sin than the grossest sins listed earlier? They were greater, not because they were more drastic sins than murder, sexual predication, or the destroying of the mores and standards of society. They were greater because these were sins directly against God and against the Body of Christ. Paul, of course, is referring to his intentional and forceful persecution of the church (Acts 8:3, 9:1-5, 22:4-5, 26:9-11, Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6). By persecuting the church with all his might and soul, Paul was blaspheming God (i.e., denying that God had acted through Jesus to redeem the world), persecuting Christ’s living Body (the church), and doing so through violence.

Thus, Paul’s free will is demonstrated in this passage by the evil he has done. But God’s grace is demonstrated by God’s gracious action both to save Paul and to use him as a principal apostle of the church.

“I received mercy, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus”. The salvation and transformation of Paul did not begin with Paul but with God through the redemptive and liberating work of Jesus Christ on the cross. There was nothing in Paul, he confesses, that would have turned him toward God. Rather, everything within him used the Jews understanding of God (or so he thought, as a Jewish Pharisee) to destroy God’s influence in the world. It was God through Christ that intervened miraculously in his life, stopping him “dead in his tracks” on the road to Damascus and then healing him of the blindness he had brought upon himself (Acts 9:1-19). So even though one might be “the foremost” of sinners, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”.

But one is saved to serve – even the “foremost of sinners”. Paul goes on to state, “I received (the) mercy (of salvation), so that in me, as the foremost (sinner), Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life” (vs. 16). God chose Paul and chose to redeem him, even though he had so insistently persecuted the Body of Christ. But God chose to redeem Paul for a purpose. It was to “display (God’s) utmost patience” with all human beings, making Paul “an example to those who would come to believe in Christ”. That is, God saved Paul not only because God longed to redeem Paul, but also because God had also chosen Paul to be a spokesman and living example before the world of what Christ can do within even the foremost of sinners. By his very life, liberated from the constraints of the Law and of the priorities of both the Jewish and Roman systems (i.e., seeking after power, prestige, possessions and popularity), Paul would become testimony to the world of what God could do through Christ.

Overwhelmed by this recognition of what God had done for him, and grateful to God’s choice of him and God’s intervention in his life, Paul concludes his testimony with a grand benediction. “To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (vs. 17). This doxology, like all Paul’s doxologies (6:16; Rom. 16:27; Jude 25), centers on the unique nature and saving work of God, and ends with the traditional Hebrew “Amen” – a Jewish word of assent to the truth stated in that doxology or benediction. Thus, Paul’s testimony ends by stressing once again the important emphasis that permeated his testimony – that it was not by his actions but by God’s action to redeem him that Paul’s salvation and subsequent mission to the church was brought about. Left to himself, Paul would have only continued to blaspheme, persecute and do violence to the people of God. But while he was dead in his sins, God acted so that “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

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