

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; Luke 18:1-8; II Timothy 3:14—4:5

Jeremiah 31:27-34. The prophet Jeremiah had the depressing task of constantly and consistently bringing bad news to the nation of Judah, for his task was to call both the people and the powers of Judah to accountability for their rejection of Yahweh and of Yahweh's shalom community. In fact, Jeremiah's message was so depressing that the word "jeremiad" has entered into the English language to describe "a prolonged lamentation or complaint". It is both magnificent justice and grace, therefore, that God allowed Jeremiah the privilege of being the first prophet of the Babylonian Exile to proclaim a future and a hope for Israel. This privilege is presented in the most striking language in the Old Testament lesson for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Jeremiah proclaims, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge" (31:27-30).

Jeremiah begins his message of hope to Judah by using symbols of fertility. One could look upon the defeat and decimation of Judah and their absorption into Babylonian captivity as the end of their existence as a nation and of God's noble experiment. But instead, God through Jeremiah tells the people that the Lord will "sow the house of Judah with the seed of humans and animals". The two Hebrew words translated "sow" and "seed" are from the same Hebrew root, thus making an allusion to Genesis 15:18. The author is saying that God is promising to Israel a renewed fertility; the nation will become pregnant again with a future and a hope. Both the Jewish people and their livestock will become fecund again, they will multiple, give birth and grow in the land. By referring to both "humans" and "animals", Jeremiah is not simply referring to individuals and specific beasts, but to the political, religious and economic systems of the nation. Though it appears that Israel has no future, the reality is that they and their nation will live again! Thus, the prophet who had to prophecy that God would "pluck up and break down, overthrow, destroy and bring evil" will, after the Babylonian captivity "build" and "plant" a new nation.

The premise both upon which that new nation would be built and that the present captivity in Babylon would be lived out would be that of individual responsibility. Apparently, the Jews in captivity had been quoting the proverb, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". Jeremiah, in essence, tells them to stop doing such quoting – because by using this proverb, they were avoiding responsibility for their own contribution to the mess that Judah was in. By using this parable, the Jewish political, economic and religious leaders in Babylon were avoiding responsibility for their own action by blaming past generations of Jews. They excused their own actions by declaring that, if only previous generations had been faithful to the Law and the covenant with God, and had centered their nation in justice, equitable distribution of their wealth, elimination of poverty and nurturing a personal walk with God and

each other, everything would have been all right. Thus, the nation's children (us) would never have had to go into captivity.

But, Jeremiah is suggesting, there is enough blame to go around. The problem is not simply *them*. The problem is *us*. We must assume responsibility for our own acts of oppression, lust for power, greed, exploitation and the need to control and order all of life to our benefit. Everyone must assume responsibility for the way he or she has contributed to the national malaise because of each person's own greed, lust for power, and need to control and dominate. Everyone "shall die for their own sins"!

It is only as the people of Judah can come to the place where they assume responsibility for the ways they have contributed to the national malaise (rather than blaming others) will the nation have any future or hope. Redemption cannot occur in and to the nation, even in captivity, unless everyone assumes responsibility for themselves. But if they do assume such responsibility, and recognize themselves as sinners and their sins as contributing to the nation's malaise, then a new possibility opens to them. God can work in the nation in a way God has not been able to work before.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (vss. 31-34).

This is probably the single greatest statement in the book of Jeremiah, and perhaps even his reward after a lifelong ministry of having to be a "jeremiad" to his people! Jeremiah is given the privilege of sharing with his people both in Jerusalem and in Babylonian captivity that God will make a new covenant with them so that God "will be their God and they shall be my people". It is certainly the high point of his theology, and is likely one of the most profound and moving passages in the entire Bible. By its very words, it conveys the most extraordinary hope that one can imagine for a people living in the midst of desolation and captivity.

It is very important that as Christians use this passage, its original meaning to the Jews hearing it from the pen of Jeremiah not be overwhelmed by a Christian interpretation of it. When we Christians use this passage, we tend to interpret it as suggesting that the new covenant to which Jeremiah refers is the New Testament (or covenant) of Jesus Christ. It is legitimate for Christians to stress that faith in Jesus is in continuity with God's covenant with Israel. But Jeremiah is not here predicting a new faith and theology through Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, what he is stressing is that God will build a renewed relationship between himself and the people and systems of Israel. It is not about the abnegation of Israel in favor of the church, but the realizing of Israel to be all that God had all along desired them to be.

The return of Israel from Babylonian bondage will be the signal that God has begun doing a new thing in Israel, Jeremiah proclaims. The old covenant based upon obedience to the Law of Moses will undergo an amazing adjustment as God makes a new covenant with his people (Deut. 30:1-10). This new covenant will not be based upon the obedience of laws that brings order and divine purpose to the nation's political, economic and religious life. Rather, this new covenant will be one in which each Jew will be existentially involved. It is one built upon a personal, dynamic and continuing relationship of faith and love between God and the people, so that it is built far more upon a personal commitment and relationship with God than it is upon a desire to obey rules and regulations. The new covenant, like the old, will still be one committed to a politics of justice, an economics of equity and a religion of oneness with God. But it will be one in which each person is dynamically and intentionally involved, so that one desires with his whole being to be at one with God and with all of Jewish society.

Thus, no one will have to urge others, "Know the Lord", "for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more". God will work redemptively in each Jew's heart, so that they sense themselves as forgiven and yearn to live a life worthy of such forgiveness. Thus, the new relationship that will underlie the new covenant will be a dynamic, personal relationship akin to that between a husband and wife who, out of love for one another, seek to be caring and responsive to each other rather than having their own ways. It is upon such a deeply committed love relationship that the new kingdom of God – the shalom community – will be built!

Psalm 119:97-104 is, in the acrostic poem of Psalm 119, the portion for *mem* (or the letter, "m"). In this portion of Psalm 119, the author declares, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me" (vss. 97-98).

In essence, this part of the acrostic compares and contrasts the psalmist's relationship to the Law of Moses to that of his foes. He insists that his interaction with the Law is far deeper and continuing than his foes grasp it. Meditating on the Law day and night, open to its mysteries, absorbed in every word of it has brought – and keeps on bringing – the psalmist into a continuing interaction with the Law. This is unlike his enemies (vs. 98), his teachers (vs. 99) and his elders (vs. 100) whose interaction with and commitment to the Law is only superficial, and likely used only to strengthen or secure their own position. Therefore, they cannot obey it (much less be absorbed by it) to the depth as does this psalmist.

This, incidentally, is not a boast on the part of the psalmist. It reminds me of the byline in the old television series, "Paladin", which was about a gunslinger in the 19th century American west. Paladin was supposed to be the fastest draw in the west; his response to that reality was "No boast; just fact!" So, to this psalmist, his absorption in study of the Law is "no boast; just fact!" But it provides a distinct advantage to him over other supposed followers of Yahweh!

If it seems a bit arrogant for someone to say that his understanding of the Law (or of Scripture) is greater than his enemies, teachers and elders, stop and think about the reality of reading the Bible from a justice and economic-political perspective. Reading the Bible this way brings new

nuance to old scriptures. It is not that the standard interpretation of scripture we formerly embraced is invalid; there is great wisdom in such a reading of it and we can use it as such. But it is that working with the scripture in the light of a more clear understanding of the political, economic and religious times in which it is set (see the Gospel Lesson for today as an example) brings whole new dimensions to the scripture for us who read it from such an understanding. So, in fact, we do have a greater understanding of the scripture than have our teachers and elders. “No boast; just fact!”

Luke 18:1-8 is a most penetrating parable told by Jesus that demonstrates how thoroughly he understood the Israelite political and economic realities of his time, and his perception that the only way change would occur would be for the oppressed to use the power they had at their disposal in order to be treated fairly by Israel’s systems. Consequently, this parable is a political primer on how God’s people are to work in order to bring about the transformation of the world from an arena of oppression and exploitation by the powerful into the world as God intended it to be – a world of justice, equity and relationality.

The parable can be summarized as follows. A judge has been hearing a case brought before him by a widow to be adjudicated. In her opinion, she has been treated unjustly by her “opponent” (as she calls him). The judge refuses to decide in favor of the widow and to pass judgment upon her opponent. But she badgers him so insistently that he finally concludes, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming (to me, making her case)” (18:4-5). Then Jesus concludes the parable, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them” (vss. 7, 8).

This parable is not truly understandable to 21st century people unless we understand the unique role of the judge in first century Israelite culture. A judge was not the person responsible for hearing trials under state law and adjudicating specific cases in that light. He was the primary interpreter of the Torah, who adjudicated serious differences between people in the light of the Torah. These judges were (as the Gospels called them) “scribes” who adjudicated the Torah while the rabbis taught the Torah.

What was particularly important to understand was that, at the time of Jesus, judges worked for and were responsible to the political-religious system of their day (the Temple priesthood, Pharisees and Sadducees). Consequently, they interpreted the Torah in ways that would protect that system. Therefore, they were not so much interested in supporting justice as they were to interpret Torah in ways that would both maintain and extend the power and wealth of Israel’s ruling elite (including themselves) – and especially the priesthood. The task of the judges was to serve the interests of their rulers, not to dispense impartial justice. The point is that all peasants recognized this reality; none were so naïve as to believe that judges really represented honest justice. It is this reality that Jesus assumes his listeners will understand when he starts to tell a story about judges.

The widow, on the other hand, was among Israel's most vulnerable people. Because she had no man either to represent her legally or to protect her economically, she was at greatest risk within that culture to be exploited. Consequently, because a widow was so vulnerable, she was always likely to slip into the bottom class of Israelites, the "expendables". That is why, in scripture, "widows and orphans" are consistently listed among the most powerless people. This, too, was thoroughly understood by Jesus' listeners. So for him to begin a parable making the key players a judge and a widow sets the scene, because all Jesus' listeners will assume that this judge will seek to take advantage of and even exploit this widow.

The listeners are quick to realize that is exactly what Jesus has in mind, when he introduces the judge as one "who neither feared God nor had respect for people". That is, he is not following a faithful obedience to the Torah (he doesn't "fear God"), and he is not truly committed to justice ("respect for people"). The "opponent" of this widow is likely trying to exploit her in some way (possibly financially), and she has turned to the judge for justice. But rather than receiving justice, what has become apparent is that this judge seems to favor her adversary. Obviously, this unnamed "opponent" must be of Israel's priesthood or ruling class, and therefore shares class interests with the judge. In order to maintain "the world as it is", the judge is inclined to rule in favor of the opponent, even though it is clear that by all rules of Torah, he is exploiting this widow.

What does this widow do? Jesus tells us that she is relentless in confronting and badgering this judge. She is absolutely tenacious, and won't let up until she gets a favorable ruling. She is going to wear down this judge! Most of all, she confronts him in a most politically sophisticated way. Because she has no other power than herself and the Torah on her side, she goes public with the case. She confronts the judge publicly, and does so in a most embarrassing way. She doesn't seek to negotiate an accommodation behind the scenes; she confronts him publicly, over and over again, and does so by crying that she is being denied justice.

The response of the judge is intriguing. He says, "though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice" (vs. 4-5a). The translation, "keeps bothering me" is a terribly weak translation of the Greek, *hypopiaze*. This is a boxing term, and is used of a person receiving so many blows to the head that he is reeling. It is literally, "gives me a black eye"!

In other words, this judge is uncomfortably aware that this woman's continual public confrontation of him is giving him a black eye before that constituency over which he is judge. He is rapidly losing credibility before his public, because of his refusal to do justice and to favor the widow's opponent. And he realizes he is in a "no-win" situation. Therefore, because he is a practical politician, he adjudicates in favor of the widow, receives the credibility from the crowd that he needs to maintain himself with some status before his constituency, and at least in this one instance, rules in favor of true Torah justice rather than for the "powers that be".

Jesus concludes, "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth" (vss. 7-8)?

Justice, in the Old Testament and in its Torah was not impartiality toward all. The notion of justice developed in the Hebrew scriptures was that God showed partiality and expects God's people to show partiality toward the powerless, the poor, the orphan and widow, and the alien (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19-22). Because the world was already skewed with power lying in the hands of the rulers, the wealthy and the religious hierarchy, one doesn't achieve justice by working for impartiality. Justice only occurs by compensating those who are powerless, poor and marginalized. Only by their being justly compensated and favored do the scales of justice start to balance, and impartiality becomes an option.

This was the case of this widow. And this is precisely what Jesus is calling his followers to be about through this parable. God is going to truly give justice as humanity (the church, Israel, the political, economic and religious systems of society) seeks to compensate the poor and powerless, and work for their benefit. And this will happen, not because those in power will have a change of heart and benevolently seek to act justly. This will happen only when those in power are forced to act justly. And that won't happen unless the poor and God's people confront the powerfully publicly and make it in their business to change their policies.

Will the poor and God's people actually end up doing that? This is where Jesus' sense of hopelessness, by this time in his ministry, is exposed. "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will the church prove itself to be on the side of the poor, willing to publicly confront the powers that be in order to bring about authentic justice? Or will they become co-opted by the powers, and end up supporting them and providing religious justification for their usurpation of the power of the people? Jesus hopes the church will be equal to the task. But he has his doubts!

One thing more needs to be stressed in this parable. Luke begins it with these words. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1). And yet the parable said nothing about prayer, but rather how to use power in the cause of justice. So why would Luke introduce this clearly-political parable with such words? I believe he did so in order to stress to those reading this account that to work for justice is to pray.

Martin Luther once wrote, "To sing is to pray twice". In a profound sense, Jesus is saying in this parable that to work for authentic justice for the poor and powerless was to pray twice! And that is because authentic prayer includes the entire life of the believers and in particular, their active participation and initiative in crying out, protesting and working against injustice for the apparently-expendables of our world!

II Timothy 3:14-4:5 reminds Timothy of his foundations in Christian faith, and the implications of that base upon the way he would live into his ministry and to live out his life. Paul begins "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how, from childhood, you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:14-15). In using the words, "from whom", Paul is using only a plural grammar. Therefore, he is not suggesting that Timothy's learning in scripture comes exclusively from him. Rather it comes from "whom you learned it", and that "from childhood, you have known the sacred writings". Timothy's teachers have been his mother

Eunice and grandmother Lois, and possibly others about whom we know nothing. The point is that one doesn't grow into a mature faith by one's self, but stands on the shoulders of those who have been mentors and teachers – in this case, “from childhood”.

The “sacred writings” to which Paul refers is not the Bible as we have it today. In fact, portions of the New Testament were not yet written when this letter was likely penned. The sacred writings, of course, are the Hebrew Bible. And he has been taught them from childhood, perceiving how Jesus is the natural culmination of the Old Testament message.

Paul then goes on to speak of the authority of the Hebrew Bible. The church, since these words were penned, has used them to refer to New as well as Old Testament. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (vv. 16-17).

The key word in this passage is the word, “inspired”. When 21st century Christians use the word, they tend to mean a particular theory of the inspiration or authority of scripture. But of course, Paul had no sense of what would be the later struggles of the church to articulate the means used by God to make scripture authoritative. The word he used, “inspire”, is from the Latin “inspirare” that means “to breathe out”. That is why some translations prefer to present this verse as “All scripture is breathed out by God” (e.g., ESV). The thought captured by the choice of this expression was that the Word of God is dynamic and active, not passive (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh” [John 1:1,14]), and thus makes Himself (itself) engage with us.

In chapter four, Paul then concludes his exploration of Timothy's embrace of the foundations (the scriptures) of the Christian faith. He solemnly charges Timothy to be faithful to that gospel (4:1-5). That means living out his life and ministry by proclaiming the gospel, having clarity about his mission and being persistent in its being carried out, “convince, rebuke and encourage with utmost patience”, remain centered on your task (the meaning of “be sober” rather than “do not get drunk”), endure suffering in the carrying out of that mission, always be ready to share your faith with anyone open to hearing it, and “carry out your ministry fully”. This is the way to truly live out faithfulness to the foundations of our faith and our biblical heritage. For our love of scripture and commitment to it is not for the purpose of indulging in theological speculation or liturgical or polity reform, but for “teaching, reproof, correction and training” (3:16b). For it is meant to prepare us for Christian mission in the world and to sustain us as we seek to carry out that mission in our daily lives and work.

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