

# Sermon: Pentecost III: Proper 8

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June 29, 2014

Year A

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

Last week... we heard Jeremiah's tormented words in Ch. 20... words about violence and destruction... words that came from God... they weren't words he wanted to say... they weren't words anyone wanted to hear... but when he didn't say them... they were like a burning fire shut up in his bones...

Most of Ch. 27 is about God's decision to give the Israelites into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon... and about how the Kings of Edom, of Moab, of the Ammonites, the King of Tyre, and the King of Sidon... and King Zedekiah of Judah are to serve Nebuchadnezzar too... they're to serve Nebuchadnezzar's son and his grandson... and then the tables will be turned... but in the mean time... God says mind your own business... it's not your affair... if you want to keep on tilling and living on your own land... stay out of this...

And Jeremiah asked King Zedekiah of Judah... *Why should you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the king of Babylon, for they are prophesying a lie to you.*

At the very beginning of Ch. 28... in the four verses before today's reading... the prophet Hananiah was in God's house with Jeremiah... and the priests... and all the people... and Hananiah said... *Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD'S house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away*

*from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.*

And Jeremiah's very controlled... and maybe somewhat sarcastic response... is *Amen! May the LORD make it so...* from your mouth to God's ears... good luck with that one... Jeremiah realizes that Hananiah is saying what the people want to hear... but is that really prophetic...

And Jeremiah has been wearing a yoke of straps and bars around his neck... that God instructed him to make... it represents how Jeremiah is yoked to Yahweh's servant Nebuchadnezzar... the *Good News According to Jeremiah*... is that God is using Nebuchadnezzar... and the powerful Babylonian army... to change the hearts and wills of God's defeated people... and many of you will remember that it's during the Babylonian Exile that the Jewish people codify much of their scripture...

And in 28:10... Hananiah takes the yoke from Jeremiah's neck... and smashes it on the ground... and claims that within two years.. God will smash the yokes that Nebuchadnezzar... has put around the necks of all the nations...

Theologian Douglass Bailey wrote: In a gesture of steeled nonviolence, Jeremiah walks silently out of the temple... but you can't help but hear the immutable message ringing beneath his hushed steps: Beware of anyone... who will sell the soul... in order to announce good news that makes for a popular prophet... or pastor... there is a critical cost for peace... peace requires soul justice and social justice!

We're called to obedience to the word of God... even when it's unpopular... and to avoid it... to minimize it... is like having fire burning within one's bones...

In today's reading from Romans... Paul lays out a framework for those communities which have been liberated from the power of sin and death... and he talks about a new and liberating obedience to God... these are words which for most of us... just don't go together... liberating... obedience... these two words seem mutually exclusive... they can't go together... can they... because most of us are quick to embrace the freedoms we find in *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*... but we reject most kinds of obedience that restrict...

On Friday... four young men were walking around in the East Price Hill neighborhood of Cincinnati... toting high-powered AR-15 rifles... they were spouting racial slurs... they were asserting their legal right to carry arms in public... but they were right there on the edge of looking for a fight... and it was all recorded on video... they were later indicted on menacing charges... life... liberty... and the pursuit of happiness...

We live in a world where digital interaction has all but replaced personal interaction... where we can customize most aspects of our digital experience... where we can watch almost any movie we want... when we want... on our mobile device *and with stereo sound*... life... liberty... and the pursuit of happiness...

But Paul talks about how there's freedom from... and freedom for... now that we're freed from sin... we're now able to become slaves of righteousness... we're liberated from sin... to become obedient to God...

Today we are between Memorial Day and the Fourth of July... next week... we're going to sing America the Beautiful... in commemoration of the 4th... the second verse ends like this... *America... America... God mend thine every flaw... confirm thy soul... in self control... thy liberty in law*... the writers believed that America's liberty was also found in law... so in some ways... we're caught between not minimizing the sacrifices of those who died protecting our freedoms... specific kinds of freedoms... and not making more of our independence and autonomy than we ought to... autonomy that finds expression

in "I want what I want when I want it." For Paul... this kind of thinking would have been an outrage... a sure-fire prescription for falling back under the dominion of sin...

And theologian Rudolph Bultmann writes: we've got the idea of freedom backwards... the illusory freedom to do whatever we want... merely *delivers us up to our drives... to do in any moment... what lust and passion dictate... genuine freedom... is freedom which withstands the clamor and pressure of momentary motivations*. This genuine freedom is possible only when our conduct is determined by something that transcends the present moment... and which is obedient to a higher call: a call from God...

I struggle regularly... with how to make discipline and obedience to God's will... a kind of perfect freedom... I struggle with how to be free from the tyranny of my small self... and obedient to the wisdom of my greater Self... but I believe this is just what we are all called to do...

Obedience... freedom... and hospitality... in today's Gospel... Jesus is talking to the disciples about those who will welcome them into their homes... he says that if someone simply offers a disciple a cup of cold water... they won't lose their reward... when we distill the Gospel into its essence... one word we can come up with is love... and if we love... we will offer hospitality... and one of the ways we can reflect on how hospitable we really are... is to think about who we invite into our homes... who we invite into God's house... and who we invite to this Table...

There's a story of welcome about a man who died... he wasn't a member of the local denomination... or the local church... which had a cemetery... his family didn't live nearby... but knew their relative was connected to the community... they asked that local priest if their relative could be buried there... there was some reluctance... the priest said the man could be buried on the grounds... but just outside the fence of the cemetery... and with some equal reluctance... the family agreed to this... the service was held... and about a year later... several of them returned to pay their respects...

but they could not find the grave site... with great concern they contacted the priest and asked what had happened to their loved one... why had his body been moved... where had he moved it... the priest paused... and said that in the last year... his own theology of welcome had grown... and the man's grave site was still there... right where it was... the priest had just moved the fence...

You've heard me mention Nadia Bolz-Weber... the tattooed Lutheran Pastor in Colorado... recently... Nadia wrote: I'll tell you one sign of hope I see in the Rocky Mountain Synod... the Bishop's office has moved from a fancy office space... surrounded by PR firms and media companies in the seat of Denver's power grid... and into a slightly run-down church building... in an unimpressive part of town. Now... to some this might be something to worry about... we no longer hold the same place of prestige... perhaps this is another sign that "the church is dying". But perhaps not... perhaps we are in a time... when we can be church without so many distractions... perhaps our definition of success... can now align itself... with what is foolishness to the world... and yet life... to those in Christ. Perhaps a fence has been moved...

One of Thomas Merton's movable fences was expressed in an image of love... he said: Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy, if anything can.

Maybe we can entertain more ideas about love and foolishness... let's let our freedom be obedience... and our obedience be freedom... let's invite those who are least like us... and see who comes... let's invite prophetic words... and prophetic actions into our lives... after all... look around... we're already breaking all kinds of rules about who's allowed to be here... to serve here... to be fed here... I'm confident we can open the door even wider... pray God... to make it so...