

Jeremiah 1: 4-10  
I Corinthians 13:1-13  
Luke 4: 21-30

Building and Planting  
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Today we heard from two prophets, Jeremiah and Jesus, separated by a few centuries, but sharing some common experiences. Our Scriptures say that they were called by God, anointed by God, and that God spoke through them. We could say a lot of other things about prophets. Frederick Beuchner, the pastor and writer, says 3 interesting things. First: “No prophet is on record as having asked for the job.” Second: “Most of the prophets were a little mad (mad as in “crazy”) before they were through, if they weren’t mad to begin with.” Third: “The prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness, no one was ever comfortable.”

In short, a prophet’s voice is hard to listen to. Not necessarily all the words. Some of them spoke beautiful poetry. In the Gospel reading, we are continuing a story where Jesus had read lovely, inspiring words from the prophet Isaiah, which we heard here last week. Those beautiful, stately cadences about Good News to the poor, release for the captives, and letting the oppressed go free are just made for reading aloud. The people in the synagogue thought so too, and they were impressed with Jesus for reading them. But the deeper understanding and application of the words was a bit more difficult. Jesus kept talking, as prophets will do. He does not want his hearers to rest complacent in the idea that the words applied to them – that the residents of Nazareth were the privileged recipients of God’s liberating and comforting message. He pushes them out of their comfort zone to say that prophets are sent to help the real outsiders. And, by the way, we are talking about the people you hate.

It is clear that Jesus sometimes went out of his way to make people uncomfortable and angry, as he does in this story. Some people believed that he was one of the ancient prophets come back to life. In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear that some people thought he was Jeremiah himself. Big surprise: Jeremiah also made people angry. He also felt called by God to speak that uncomfortable poetry, hard to hear: “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant,” as it says in our reading today. He also felt that he was sent not to a local community but to all nations and kingdoms: his message had an international application. And like Jesus, Jeremiah was persecuted, ridiculed, and rejected by many.

To us, though, Jesus was more than a prophet. After this inaugural event in Nazareth, his ministry encompasses so much more than words. When we continue to read, we find healing, friendships, examples of a new way to live and a new meaning of death. We see divine grace reflected in this life. We look to Jesus for hope and inspiration in a way that we look to no other person in the Bible. We look for ways to live in community that reaches beyond the borders of a hometown or a home country. Jesus gives us a new lens with which to look at the world and a new way to hear God speak.

At the risk of seeming to simplify this too much, we might call this the lens of love. We could turn to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first letter to Corinthians to help us understand the particular prophetic challenge of this lens. This chapter was written a generation after that day in Nazareth

when Jesus picked up Isaiah's scroll. It was written to a community far away in Greece, a new Christian community. The apostle Paul, who had helped to found this church, has heard that they are in trouble. They can't agree about how to live in a pagan society, which of the old rules still apply, who should be in charge, how worship should go, whose prophecies or outbursts they should listen to, or how to evaluate the gifts and talents of the group. They have gotten a bit lost in the work of being a church. Paul has already written about all their gifts and services and activities, each of which has its place. Then he speaks of a greater gift. It is love that gives all the other gifts their true direction and power.

Many of us know this chapter well because it is so frequently read at weddings. It is always beautiful in that context. But it is clear that it was written for a different purpose. It was written to keep a church from flying to pieces. This is not a soft or sentimental piece of writing. In a way, it is one of the hardest and most challenging set of words that a community can ever hear. It refuses us the luxury of being comfortable in the presence of God's word. It will always call for new reserves of love to meet each new situation and each new prophetic voice.

The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians lists the things that are worthless without the lens of love, the ears of love, the voice of love: things like eloquence, prophecy, knowledge, faith, generosity and self-sacrifice. It's a bit difficult to hear all those things described as worthless, isn't it? In fact, they are all qualities and actions Jesus displayed in his ministry. The key was that he loved people, all kinds of people. He loved the ones he healed, the ones he criticized, and the ones who hurt him. He loved them enough to tell them when they were wrong; he loved them enough to teach them how to expand their horizons. It is that union of love and challenge that makes it so difficult to be - or to hear - a prophet in the footsteps of Jesus. Wouldn't it be nice if there were neater categories, like those partial categories Paul spoke of? We would rather be a community of either prophets **or** healers. We are people of limited gifts, after all. Paul wrote, "For now we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." We are working towards that goal of completeness we find in Jesus.

Each of us will not be a prophet like Jeremiah or Jesus. Not many of us feel called or anointed, or that we have God's words miraculously put in our mouths. But the message of the "Love Chapter" is that we will find our vocation in the body of Christ, as we love each other and seek out each other's gifts. We will then speak words of prophecy because they are spoken with love. We will hear words of prophecy because we are listening with love. Our generosity and self-sacrifice will take on a depth of meaning because of the love behind it.

It may seem that I have been speaking just to our little church community here, and it is indeed important for us to think and act this way as a congregation. But we have to remember how the people of Nazareth would have preferred to claim the prophecy...and stay at home. The lens of love has a way of taking us beyond this place to the foreign places where God loves to heal and set people free. We tune our ears to be open to those distant sounds of God's grace working in the world, outside these walls, in less comfortable places and times.

Today we "commissioned" the group of people who are going to work this month in the Dominican Republic. I can imagine some of them thinking, with young Jeremiah, "Truly I do not know how to do this, for I am only a boy"...or a girl or a person of little experience. As with so many endeavors, there are just so many unknowns: it is not an easy prospect. But we are trusting a

God of many names, one of which is “I am with you.” We send these laborers out companioned by each other, companioned by God.

Today we also read in our bulletin a statement about banning assault weapons. These are not easy words, nor are the discussions which they will inspire. It is only by allowing our hearts to crack open with love: love for the lost lives, love for children of the future, love for our communities, and yes, love for those who disagree with these proposals, that we can be a genuine community of faith, a genuine prophetic voice, honest and humble followers of Jesus.

Today we also come together for the sacrament of communion. Some people call this a love feast. There is only a little bit of bread and a little sip of juice for each person: not much of a feast for someone whose stomach is empty. But it is a chance for us to physically act out our sharing, and to reflect on the bond of love that exists between us. And with the taste of grain and grape, we hope to imbibe something more: strength for the journey, wisdom in our speaking, and hearts for prophetic ministry. Amen.