

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series A, Proper 7)

Lessons for the Day: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

To Be or Not To Be—There Is No Question!

June 21, 2020

O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! "Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my close friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can overcome him and take our revenge on him." But the Lord is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

Dear friends in Christ and fellow redeemed:

Among the most famous of all the words written by the great playwright, William Shakespeare must surely be the words which begin what is known as Hamlet's Soliloquy. Most people know those words: "*To be, or not to be - that is the question.*" Many people have used (or abused) those words, changing them or trying to fit them into different situations. I once saw a cartoon of a young fellow in school trying to spell the word 'bubble' on a test, and underneath was a caption which said, two b's or not two b's - that is the question. I once preached a sermon I entitled, "To sin or not to sin - Is that the question?" And I want to use those words again today as we look at this text from Jeremiah. To be or not to be a disciple of Christ—that may be the question people ask themselves. That question comes up because it seems to be harder and harder for us to live as disciples of Christ when so many of the people around us live their lives without Him. It is hard to be faithful to the things our God would have us to do when there are so many around us who are far too eager to lead us away from God and His grace. More than that, when we have to deal with the ridicule, the hatred, the persecution that can come from being a follower of Christ, we may wonder if being His disciples—and thereby being different from the world—is worth it.

In one of the most frustrating times in his ministry, Jeremiah asked himself that question. He knew the struggle of being faithful in all that the Lord had asked of him, especially when he felt that his faith affected his life so negatively. But as Jeremiah realized there is no question, at least not for those who know the forgiveness, grace and life that we have in Jesus Christ. Even if it isn't always easy to live as a child of God in the midst of a world of sin, we can be sure of this: it is always worth it.

Being a Christian can be, and is, the most wonderful sensation in the world. Most Christians have experienced a spiritual high—what we often refer to as a "mountain-top" experience; a time when they felt so close to God, so loved by Him; so filled with joy because they know that they are His child. But those high points don't last forever. There are many ups and downs in our lives, even in our lives of faith. There is nothing the devil hates more than a Christian who is completely happy in his life as a forgiven child of God in Christ. The devil will do whatever he can to destroy that happiness.

Jeremiah knew the devil's dirty work from first-hand experience. God had called Jeremiah to serve Him as a prophet, saying: "*to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.*" (Jeremiah 1:7-8 - ESV) With that confidence and calling, Jeremiah began his service as a prophet of God. He did proclaim the message that God gave—a message of judgement because of the sinfulness, idolatry and corruption of the nation. But Jeremiah quickly learned that there were many people who did not appreciate what he was doing and the things he was saying. They disliked the fact that he proclaimed that God would judge the nation because of its sin and corruption. Many people considered Jeremiah a traitor, for he told people that they should submit to Babylon, who for it was God's instrument of judgment. He was faithful in preaching the word of God, and yet no one really listened. Jeremiah says in our text: *I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.*

In fact, things were so bad that people were plotting against him. They were waiting for Jeremiah to slip up, to say something truly treasonous, so that they could arrest him as a traitor and be done with him forever. How frustrating this was for Jeremiah! The more he tried to be faithful to God, the more he was hated and ignored by the people to whom he had been sent. He

wondered if it was all worth the effort. Why did he bother? And in his despair, he even wished that he had never been born—then he would not have had to experience the pain and frustration that often comes from trying to be a child of God in an unbelieving world.

As a pastor, I can appreciate what Jeremiah was going through. I know some of the frustrations of ministry that Jeremiah experienced. I know every pastor faces those frustrations. There are weeks when I stand up here, sharing the word of God with you, trying to encourage and energize you by reminding you of all that our great and loving God has done for us, yet I wonder if anyone is listening. I wonder if anybody cares. The message goes out, but I'm not sure it has any affect on the lives of the people of the church. We don't always see people filled with the joy and hope that comes from knowing and believing that Christ has saved us from sin and eternal death in hell by dying and rising again for us. There are weeks when I ask myself why I bother. What good does it do, anyway? And although it is not an easy thing for me to admit, there are those times when, like Jeremiah, I have thought about giving up and doing something else. Yet I have also felt what Jeremiah felt: *If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

You don't have to be a pastor to feel the frustration of being at odds with the world because you know and believe that Jesus is Lord and that the Words of Holy Scripture are the inspired Word of God. There have been doctors who have refused to perform abortions or who have refused to help a patient end their life, because they know that God says life is sacred from conception to natural death. They are censured and threatened with the loss of their medical license. Teachers have resisted teaching evolution unless they have also been able to express the biblical view of creation, and have been penalized or fired for their stance. It doesn't pay to have a different view of life, of gender, of morality that is different from the world view with which we are inundated.

We will all face similar frustration at some point, if we are trying to live as a faithful disciple of Christ in an unbelieving world. Surely we've seen that our Christian faith and life creates opposition or tension in our relationships with friends, with the people we work with, and even with members of our family. It is hard to obey God's commandments when the things of this world make it so easy to break them. Maybe that is why we give in so often, putting God second, rather than keeping Him first and foremost in our lives.

Paul reminds us in our Epistle lesson: *Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.* (Romans 6:13 - ESV) Yet it can be so hard to live as God's people when, at times, things would be so much easier if we were not Christians. There are those who preach that a 'genuine faith brings great worldly rewards. Then why does it seem that all we know are the struggles of faith?

One of the great things we learn from Jeremiah is that in our moments of weakness and doubt we don't trust our feelings—we trust God. To be or not to be faithful to God? Jeremiah knew there was no question. He would be faithful to God, because God was faithful to him. He even says to us: *Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.* God has rescued His people. He does deliver us from all the troubles and cares of this world. That mighty warrior who was with Jeremiah is also with us, giving us the strength to endure the ridicule and mocking, to endure whatever may come upon us because of our faith, confident that the final victory is ours through Him. God, in His great love for us, looked down upon us and saw our dismal state. He saw us suffering and doomed to eternal damnation because of its sin. And God did something about it. He gave His own Son to die in our place, as a sacrifice for our sins. Christ never thought, "oh, it's too hard to do what you want, Father!" He does say: *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."* (Luke 22:42 - ESV)

Jesus looked to the cross on which He would die and knew there was question of what must be. Our Saviour knew we could only have life through His sacrifice on the cross. He endured the pain and the shame of the cross for us, and then rose to life again that first Easter morning, to guarantee that we are alive in Him as the people of God. Our life in Him is always a blessing, for no matter what the world may think of us we have the eternal victory in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells us that persecution and struggle will come to God's faithful. He says: *you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.* (Matthew 10:22 - ESV) No, it is not always easy to be disciple of Christ, and to live as a child of God. Our life of faith will create ridicule and scorn from the people around us. It can bring loss, as it does in areas where Christians are suffering and dying because of their faith in Christ. That may be our fate one day, too. No, it's not always easy to be a Christian and to live in God's truth—but it is always worth it. Jesus says:

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33 - ESV) The Lord who gave Himself for us promises to acknowledge us before His Father. To be or not to be faithful to our God? There is no question, for we are alive in Christ and will live in Christ. Amen.