



September 3, 2017 -- Unbridled Directness

Given by Pastor Mattei

Jeremiah 15:15-21

15 O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. 16 Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. 17 I did not sit in the company of merry-makers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. 18 Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. 19 Therefore thus says the Lord: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. 20 And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord. 21 I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Like Peter, we do not know how to handle the fact that following Jesus will lead us to the cross (Mt 16:21-28). That's not how we picture a spiritual life. We expect that just because we proclaim to be Christians people treat us by the nice persons we project to be; we assume others will see what peace-loving people we are; we project that others will acknowledge we have a message of life and blessings to share. We picture community life to be warm and fuzzy, protected from tensions and conflict. We fancy our walk with Jesus will be trouble free and protected from evil. That approach to life reveals our understanding of success, an understanding that is in conflict with Jesus' way of life. Not that Jesus wants conflict or is not a nice person or does not have a message worth listening to. Truth is, wanting to live in integrity with godly values puts us in conflict with ourselves first and then with the rest of the world. One wonders, "Is it really worth it?"

Jeremiah asked that question of God. In fact, he had some harsh chosen words for God, even to the point of calling God a liar (v. 18). Surely, a man of God would not feel this way, would he? After years of living in isolation (God told Jeremiah not to marry, have children, or even socialize at funerals and celebrations), preaching a message of individual (not just communal) responsibility for sins, and having to deal with insults,

persecution, and rejection, Jeremiah is weary. By raising high his clenched fist to God, he lets God have a piece of his mind. In his outrage he is totally blind to his self-righteousness. When we are fully engaged in a conversation we relate to others with our whole self and are fully present. His is a heart wrenching prayer! And it's OK; our prayer is most authentic when it comes from the heart in all its raw honesty.

But Jeremiah does not stand alone. God is not silent for long and invites him back into authenticity and vocation. That Jeremiah is committed to God and to the task that God has given him is evident. But it feels like a tug of war. Again and again the prophet will express his anguish, denouncing his detractors and protesting God's role in his life. At times he would rather not preach. But filled with divine love he clearly could not stop.

Unlike those who may try and talk others out of their feelings, God neither silences Jeremiah nor attempts to convince him otherwise. We have all done it: attempting to fix people's problems, we deny, diminish or distract people away from their harsh reality. Instead God's response is a direct cut through the chase and a clear call to repentance. God does not feedback any refined empathic reflection. The One who is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, to paraphrase St Augustine speaks straight to the heart with naked and unbridled directness. That's the way God likes to relate to us. Often there is no evidence of an immediate response to prayer. But the fact that One is there listening, now *that* is enriching and more than a consoling response! It carries the day.

With the commandment for Jeremiah to repent comes the promise that God will restore him to his work as a prophet, to his work as God's mouthpiece. Moreover, God assures Jeremiah that God will strengthen him and promises to uphold Jeremiah and redeem him from any hostility that he might face.

The Bible does not record Jeremiah's repentance, but his 40-year ministry implies it. The ability to come in touch and acknowledge one's feelings, wrestle with the alleged "absence" of God and rediscover trust in God is part of the journey of faith. Like Jeremiah, we may raise our fists to God and shout a heart wrenching "Why?" God's silence may highlight at first our self-righteousness and then ask us questions in return: "Where does your responsibility in all this lie in your estimation? How might you have contributed to all this? What might you do instead of complaining? Stand up on your feet and start walking again, trusting the gifts I have given you and faithful to your call."

In the face of tragedy, let us all breathe and look inside of ourselves. There we'll find God wanting to connect intimately with us in order to encourage, strengthen and inspire us for renewal in faith, hope and love. There new life direction and meaning will help us connect with our true self and with God.