

11 (1984):41-42

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost:

Series A

**Psalm 26****Jeremiah 15: 15-21****Romans 12: 1-8****Matthew 16:21-26**

The First Lesson and the Gospel both speak about suffering. With his own eyes set on Jerusalem. Jesus found his disciples unwilling to go that extra mile, but invited them, nevertheless, to lose their lives for his sake in order to find them.

The text from Jeremiah is one of his "confessions," those intense struggles with God in which the prophet complains about his vocation and accuses God of unfairness. Note that he was reproached for God's sake (v. 15) and suffered loneliness because of the divine hand (v. 17). He even charged God with being unreliable—as unpredictable as a brook that contains water only during the rainy season (v. 18).

The prophet's own response had been impeccable: God's will and way were fully assimilated and given top priority. Nothing gave him more pleasure than being called God's child (v. 16). It was God who failed, according to Jeremiah, leaving the prophet to nurse his wounds without success.

Threatened by the people in his own home town (11:21), beaten and put into stocks (20:1-6), forbidden to marry (16:1), contradicted by his prophetic colleagues in the name of Yahweh (28:2-3), Jeremiah struggled with King Jehoiakim who could think of nothing better to do than remodel the palace during a siege

(22:13-14) and burn up the first draft of the prophet's book (chap. 36). No wonder Jeremiah suffered mid-life crisis!

Such complaining in his case was evidence of faith. He had not joined the nay-sayers and carping critics (v. 17); his complaint was with and to Yahweh. Remember me, Yahweh; visit me (v. 15).

Beleaguered or discouraged pastors are likely to see their own lives flash before them as they prepare this sermon. Well and good. But sound forth such complaints not just with the sisters and brothers in the pastoral conference or with the spouse late at night. Since we trust God, we can entrust our deepest hurts and our severest disappointments to the One whose call got us into this mess.

Such mixed signals from God are hardly restricted to clergy. Think about those great members whose faith causes them conflict at work, or whose piety is not honored by spouse or children. Think about the singles cast aside by a family-oriented society or parish. They find the word of the church aimed at couples, not at them. For those who sit alone against their will, the program of the church offers no healing, only more hurt. Can you hear their cry or help them express their pain to the One they love?

God offers three responses. 1) I am with you to save you and deliver you (v. 20). That's the Gospel in a nutshell, suitable for engraving in gold on a pencil. What could convey more of acceptance or empowerment? Ask Moses, Gideon, or Jeremiah, who were sent into the cold world with such sufficient armor. Or ask Jesus, the great Emmanuel (God with us), the one promising to be with all of us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:16-20). He took up the cross and enables us to follow (Matt. 16:24).

2) They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you (v. 20). Final victory is ours. Whatever momentary setbacks we have in life are not final or ultimate. Only a God who sent his Son to the cross could offer such assurance. The resurrection of Jesus is proof and promise that God's last great word to his people is always Yes.

3) If you return, I will restore you—so that you can serve me some more! (v. 19) The one who calls us into this mess may have his reasons. He may know that there are dear people out there who can only be reached when representatives of the people of God are willing to go all the way to the cross . . . ultimately for the sake of others. This is tough divine love, but typical. Those who lose their lives this way are sure to find it.

Says the Lord, says v. 20. You can count on it. Do you know anyone else who has a complaint department like God's? Would you want it any other way?

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