

# *“What on Earth?”*

*Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 7*

*Jeremiah 20:7-13; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39*

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus Ohio, Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Proper 7, June 25, 2017, dedicated to Benton Myles Ahrens on his second birthday, to the UCC on our 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday and to Emerson Lynn Pyles and George Andrew Pyles on their baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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Author, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel tells this story from his experience in the concentration camps: Once in our concentration camp during World War II, the Jewish people imprisoned there decided to put God on trial for failing to live up to His promises to protect them. Officiating at the trial were three rabbis who appointed a lawyer for the people and one for God. There was much evidence introduced and many days of deliberation. Finally,

everyone was gathered and the verdict was read. God was found guilty.

When the trial was over, the people were quiet. They looked at the rabbis and one person asked, “What do we do now?” The only answer that made sense to the people, the only answer in the face of reality, was they must pray (Found in *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio, 1998, p. 94).

The trial of God resonates for me as I read Jeremiah 20:7-13. Here we are given insights into the hard life of a prophet of the Lord. Jeremiah complains about his life and experience delivering the word of God. Jeremiah feels overpowered and prevailed upon. He feels he is a laughingstock who is mocked all day long. He suffers from anxiety and compulsion. When he speaks he is derided. He says that even his close friends want him to stumble and fall. And yet, when he is silent, it feels like burning fire shut up in his bones. He says, “I am weary from holding it in and I cannot.” Clearly, the pain of prophetic witness is palpable. Jeremiah feels alone. He feels like God has left him to face the suffering resulting from his vocation: prophet of the Lord Most High.

Unlike the people’s verdict in the concentration camp courtroom, God is not found guilty of abandonment, even by

his prophet who cries out in the wilderness of his soul. For Jeremiah continues, “(Nevertheless), the Lord is with me like a dread warrior. Therefore, my persecutors will stumble. It is they who will not prevail. They shall be greatly shamed. They will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten.”

Very much like the people trying God in Auschwitz, the eternal verdict - beyond the human verdict - is that prayer must rise up in the night of greatest despair. Like incense rising from the altar of the Most High, prayer lifts to God and we hang on for God’s will to be done. Jeremiah's final word is this: “To you, I have committed my cause.” Although the painfulness of prophecy has defined his relationship with God, Jeremiah's faithful witness is his final, compelling word.

Jeremiah gives us two great gifts in this passage. First, he gives us permission to complain to God. All his words are directed to God. Like other faithful Israelites, like other faithful people of faith, Jeremiah knows that no thought or emotion is forbidden in prayer. Rather, we may speak directly and honestly to God.

The second gift is this: although Jeremiah complains about his suffering as a prophet, he knows that he cannot escape his calling, and he does not.

Whatever it is that God has called you to do and be, you have the right to lay it on the line with the Lord. Tell God what troubles you. Tell God what drives you crazy, especially if it involves God's silence or seeming absence from life situations and struggles. Often, we spend hours a day on the phone telling other people what is on our mind. But we don't take one minute to tell God the same troubling news and conditions in prayer. We need to flip this ratio - hours speaking to God, minutes complaining to people.

Truthfully, I believe some of us don't get God at all. We think God will make our witness and our walk simple, peaceful, clear, even - easy. We think our own strong will and our stubborn nature will prevail upon God. We speak and act as though we are better than God. "Stand aside God," we seem to say through our words and actions. You and I seem to say, "If I were God, I would have better answers, better ways, better solutions with which to save the world." We may not use those exact words, but our actions and words in relation to other people point that way. Although you and I don't like this part of Jeremiah's story, after he wails and weeps for his condition, he walks away from egotism and idolatry. In the end, the anguish Jeremiah has expressed as the absence of God is finally acknowledged as the hiddenness of God's purpose working his plan out in Jeremiah's life.

While you and I may feel comfortable joining the prophet when he complains about God, we must also learn to join him when he praises God and sings to the Lord a song of thanksgiving and joy. Or, to put it another way, if we join with the rabbinic council of Auschwitz and find God guilty of failing to meet his promises, we must also join with the people there and (in spite of this indictment) continue to pray to God for deliverance - for after all - we, too, have committed ourselves to God's cause.

Our Gospel's medicine may be as difficult to swallow today. In Matthew 10:24-39, Jesus turns family values on its head. Jesus is not a "Focus on the Family" kind-of-guy in this text. He is not talking about the ordinary cruelties and struggles of family life, as devastating as they can be. Jesus is talking about divisions that occur in families when he walks into our lives. What happens to family loyalty when you put Jesus first in your life? I have seen struggles in families caused by the presence of Jesus in their households of faith.

What do you do when one of your family members makes a radical decision to choose another church or another faith? What do you say to parents when one adult child refuses to go to church while the other leaves the church of her childhood for a place where they speak in tongues? What do you say to Christian fathers and mothers who are delighted to see their

children become doctors, teachers, lawyers, and business leaders, and yet, when one follows God's call to ministry and seeks to be a priest or pastor, these committed “disciples of Jesus” become distraught? Years ago, I was asked by one parent, "How did we fail our daughter that she would choose the ministry or being a doctor?" Kind of tough to answer one – as a pastor. You might not believe this, but that was one moment in my life when I was speechless. After pausing (for what seemed like an eternity) I responded, “I know how you feel. I was pre-law before I felt the call the ministry. I know that let down all the lawyers in my life.”

Jesus tells us that the Gospel is inherently divisive. “What on earth” is Jesus saying?

I know we don't like this message. He says we should not be surprised when people fight about it. In Jeremiah 23:29, that contentious prophet says, “God's word is like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces.” Jesus puts it this way, “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Dustin and Amanda, I probably should have preached this before you said you wanted Emerson and George to be raised in the faith and family of Jesus Christ! Please don't take your

words back... But, guess what? It gets worse before it gets better.

Jesus continues, “I come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother . . . whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me, is not worthy of me.”

As troubling as this may sound to you, this was Jesus’ clear and present way of redefining the family. For Jesus, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you or who you look like or sound like. He was concerned about whose image you were created in. He wasn’t concerned about your street address or whose prestigious last name you carry. He came from a family which included those who had no address and whose names were forgotten to all but God. His family was made up of mutts. They were “tax collectors, lepers, Roman centurions, scruffy looking men who fished for a living and ladies in robes made of gold brocade and hordes of squealing children.” There were lots of sinners and a few saints in his family. In fact, there was no family tree on the inside cover of Jesus’ Holy Bible. As much as his ancestors mattered to him, his was more like a family forest than a family tree (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p.18).

In the marketing and advertising-driven world of the “Purpose Driven Church,” pastors and lay people are trained to seek like-minded, similar-looking, homogenous gatherings of people to bring to church and to make the next generation of Christians. We are told, churches grow from likeness. But, I have real trouble with this. And I believe Jesus would have breathed fire in reaction to the market driven church.

I believe Christians grow FROM Jesus. Once Christians have grown from His light, His life, and His love, then His churches will grow. And clearly, to grow in Jesus (according to Jesus) is not about looking the same, sounding the same, and believing all the same. It is about taking up the cross and following Him.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“There is good news here for those who have the nerve to hear it. The gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn. The gospel is not a table knife but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. The gospel is not Pablum. It is powerful stuff powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties, but as frightening as it is, it is not to be feared.”

The peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there, and anyone knows that the absence of conflict is not peace. The good news is that in Christ, God has given us someone worth

fighting about, and someone with clout enough to end all the fighting, for his word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces (Ibid).

So, Emerson Lynn and George Andrew, welcome to your new family. We may not be the best looking, the best behaving, (and by other's judgment) the best believing, and certainly not the most homogenous group you may encounter, but like you, we belong to Jesus Christ. And like you, we will seek to follow Jesus to the cross, remembering his final words in Matthew's passage today: "Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life, for my sake, will find it." And in the end, Emerson and George, the words of Jeremiah can comfort and guide us: "Lord, for you I have committed my cause."

So, take my two hands Emerson and George. The road ahead is calling us. While others may ask, "What on earth is going on?" You will know as we venture out together – all will be well with Jesus Christ leading our journey and our family. Amen.

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