

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 25, 2012, dedicated to the memory of Ardis Helaine Edmonson Holt and Elizabeth Asp upon their deaths and burials, and always to the glory of God!

“Jeremiah: Deliver Us, Lord”

Jeremiah 32:16-25

(Part VI of VIII in the Sermon Series “Great Prayers of the Bible”)

Today, we come to the sixth of eight sermons in the series “Great Prayers of the Bible.” As I reread Jeremiah in preparation for this sermon, it became apparent to me that this entire book is a great prayer. The prophet is in an intense and lifelong dialogue with God - reflected on these pages. We enter the story in Jeremiah 32 - long into this prayer of Jeremiah.

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

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How do we measure success? Most definitions will include setting and achieving goals; acquiring wealth and prestige, favor and power. Hopefully all of us would name the presence of family, friends, and faith in the equation. You may measure your success by who listens when you speak; who responds when you call or who follows when you lead. Now, stretch your measures of success across 40 years of work and life. Measure success by longevity. How have you done with the standards you have set for yourself?

By any and all of these standards, the Prophet Jeremiah

was a miserable failure. Named by God as a prophet in the womb of his mother, Jeremiah prophesied for the Lord our God for more than 40 years. When the kingdom was cut in two - Israel to the north and Judah to the south - Jeremiah was God's spokesman to Judah. But when Jeremiah spoke, nobody listened. Consistently and passionately, Jeremiah called the people to act but nobody moved. He was beaten, forsaken, thrown into a well with water in it and into a prison cell with nothing in it and even taken to Egypt as a prisoner. He was rejected by neighbors, friends, family and kings. He had no material success. With all of the little money he has, Jeremiah buys a piece of property to show that he believe in the future hope of his country in chapter 32. The nation is under siege and is about to be destroyed so the land is seemingly useless. By all standards and measures of a man, Jeremiah was a complete failure.

But in God's eyes, Jeremiah was one of the most successful people in all of human history. Though he stood alone speaking God's word, Jeremiah stood and he spoke. He declared God's message of obedience and faithfulness to disobedient and faithless people. He announced God's word in judgment AND hope. He said that God would bring us a new covenant - not one of clay tablets - but one written on the human heart - a covenant of love and justice. It was this new covenant that foretold the covenant of Jesus written on the hearts of humankind. Courageously and faithfully, Jeremiah continuously prayed to God to deliver his people. He wept for his people. He defended them as well has leveling them when they were way out of line. No matter what the personal cost to himself, no matter what the opposition, Jeremiah followed God.

Jeremiah was the quintessential suffering servant of God. He was constantly in prayer. He was constantly in dialogue with God. The message he brought from God to rulers, people and other "false" prophets is simple - "turn around" and "change your ways" or you will be destroyed. He was no diplomat. But, neither was he sent to negotiate. He was sent

to prophesy. He simply delivered God's word and lived with the consequences.

We meet Jeremiah in prayer throughout his prophetic writings. In Chapter 7, God instructs Jeremiah to *'pray for these people - (BUT) neither lift up nor cry or pray on their behalf, **do not intercede with Me**, for I will not hear you' (7:16)*. In other words, *"Pray for them...but don't come to me crying for them."* Then who exactly is the prayer lifted to?

To NOT intercede for the people is a position diametrically opposed to that of Abraham and Moses who always interceded for the people.

Did Jeremiah despair of God or decide that he and only he "knew" God? How does one survive with such conviction? No life exists for Jeremiah beyond his relationship with God. In this sense his mission as perceived by him more challenging than Moses' mission. Moses had a family - a wife, children, a brother and sister - around which life revolved. At God's request, Jeremiah is bereft of family or social relations. ***He has nothing but God - who is a seemingly impossible companion!*** His perception of the world drastically differs from that of his fellow Judeans because he knows that destruction is inevitable as a result of their breaking their covenant with God. Only He and Thee seem to share this knowledge and point of view.

This divine consciousness that pervades Jeremiah's being imbues him with sensitivity that Abraham Joshua Heschel called the "pathos" of God. Jeremiah viewed the apathetic indifference of his people as the voice of God and as such he differs from us. He may have been inspired by Moses, Amos and Hosea, but he absorbed God into his unconscious and becomes more God-intoxicated than any other prophet.

Now a great number of scholars wonder if any of Jeremiah's words were originally his own? Was he writing as he was praying or were others listening in and putting his

incantations to paper? He was so unique, that this question is real and lively.

Jeremiah's suffering relationship to God and is not just as a prophet. He struggles in relation to God as a man. He represents every person's suffering and pain and every person's real and challenging "pathos" in relation to man and God. Like everyone, he wishes to be the "vengeance" of God. In this he cannot succeed. God's anger may be righteous indignation toward injustice; Jeremiah's anger may be as well. But his anger is also very human. When he says "**avenge me**" he speaks as a suffering human being who has been mistreated by others - not as one who is God-intoxicated.

On one occasion God responds to Jeremiah's prayers with, "*It shall be well with my remnant, I shall cause the enemy to treat you well.*"(15:11) But on other occasions God does not respond to Jeremiah's prayers at all. There is only silence. Jeremiah doesn't stop talking to God - even if God is not responding. "*Vindicate me*"(17:9-18) - God is silent. "*They torment me; punish them*" (18:18-23) - God is silent. "*Cursed is my life*" (20:7-18) - God is silent. One could construe that Jeremiah is begging for death at times and God is silent.

Can you relate to the prophet's pathos and prayer life?

Jeremiah believes that God is the origin of his mission; he therefore demands God's vengeance on his enemies. He says, "*Heal me Lord and I shall be healed.*" (17:14) "*Do not be a terror to me.*" But he also speaks to God about his enemies this way: '*Let my foes be put to shame and not me . . . bring upon them the day of evil*' (17:18). *You know they wish my death, forgive them not* (18:23). He is clearly strained and ambiguous about his personal position and his prophetic mission.

In all Jeremiah's confessions he equates his enemies as God's enemies. We do not know the order of these prayers and hence it is not clear whether God responds to Jeremiah's

prayers. As noted by many scholars these prayers of Jeremiah bear a striking resemblance to a lawsuit brought to God, the righteous judge. He protests his innocence, and condemns his adversaries. He asks for mercy for himself *'Heal me . . .and I shall be healed, save me and I shall be saved' . . . Let them be ashamed that persecute me, but let me not be shamed, Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed'* (17:17-18).

Throughout his book of prophecy, the theme of self pity was inherent in Jeremiah's prayers. Yet his mission was composed of opposing objectives, *"to pluck up and to break down . . . to build and to plant."* (1:10) To do this in times of peace would have been impossible. But to do it in a time of war is beyond belief! Unfortunately, he spent most of his life in the "pluck up and destroy" mode. Who - of his own free will - would choose such a mission?

Who, on the receiving end, would wish to hear such a message? *"To whom can I speak and testify and be heard? Their ear is uncircumcised and they cannot listen."* (6:10) Jeremiah tells of his grief at the breaking of God's covenant. *"Grief overwhelms me. . . . I am utterly broken in the breaking of the daughter of my people. . . Would my head were water and my eyes a spring of tears. I would weep day and night for the slain daughters of my people."* (8:18-23)

These lamentations are similar to those he may have written in a wholly other book of the Bible - The Book of Lamentations. In this collection of lamentations over the destruction of Jerusalem, he sympathizes with God. *"I have left my house, abandoned my inheritance, given over to her enemies my dearly beloved"* (12:7). When Jeremiah asks God to avenge his enemies, is he acting as God's representative and asking for God to avenge God's enemies or is he speaking more personally? Perhaps that is what God meant when He said *'If you return, I will restore you'* (15:19) as has been suggested by Heschel - He was asking above and beyond his mission, for vengeance.

It is true what Heschel says! The divine pathos is found in Jeremiah. But I believe that the pathos of the divine is found in every one of us. If you haven't heard your voice in the struggles of this prophet today, I doubt whether you have known the dark night of the soul. Truthfully, each one of us struggles with mercy and justice (Like Reinhold Niebuhr we want more mercy for ourselves and justice for our enemies). We struggle with vengeance and forgiveness; anger and silence; righteousness and self-righteousness; deliverance and destruction. Listen to your prayers for a minute; for an hour; for a week; for a month; for a year. We want to pray the nice prayers; the good prayers; the trouble free prayers, the prayers that ask for healing, kindness and reconciliation. But, the pathos of the divine is worked out in stirring of our souls as well. We wish judgment, condemnation, and destruction upon any of the host of God's humanity under the reign of heaven who have harmed us or those we love dearly! It is natural and human to do this. Just like Jeremiah's human pathos came out in his great prayers to his soul companion, our pathos comes out in our prayers.

If you are honest, you will hear in your head and in your heart the themes and words of Jeremiah crying out, weeping and whispering to you. Jeremiah embodies our wrestling with God more than Jacob who is famous for it. Years ago, I taught a long Bible study on Jeremiah. We started with 20 and ended with four. I may not be the best teacher, but I will give some credit to my friend Jeremiah for wearing everyone down with despair. One member of my Bible study on Walter Brueggemann's two volume study of Jeremiah finally came to me and begged me to stop this study. *"I can't finish this study with you. Can you please end it now? This prophet Jeremiah is so much like me it is painful to listen to him."* (I have drawn from Rabbi Moshe Reiss' reflections on Jeremiah in his commentary on "Jeremiah: the Suffering Prophet").

Jeremiah is like us and unlike us. We can identify with his humanness and his pathos and his passion. We desire his closeness to God and his faithfulness to God's will and way.

But, looking at Jeremiah, we must also look at ourselves as people in prayer.

When we meet Jeremiah in chapter 32 and also meet his real estate bearing cousin, Hanamel. Hanamel has come to prison to visit Jeremiah and to sell him a piece of the family farm (while - as you remember - the nation is under siege). Remember, by this point Jeremiah is far into his 40 years of prophecy. Jeremiah, under the prompting of God, obliged and sealed the purchase as legally as he knew how and preserved the documents for future generations.

The catch is that the land is useless not only to Jeremiah, but to an entire generation of Judeans who are about to be taken off into exile. So why did God tell Jeremiah to buy the land? That is a good question, and one that Jeremiah now poses to God.

But pay close attention how Jeremiah approaches God in this prayer with the question at hand. When we come to God in prayer and have something on our mind to ask of him, how do our prayers typically begin? When we have a request of God, what is the content and structure of our prayer? If you are anything like me, your prayers are usually and perhaps entirely comprised of supplication. We have list of requests for God and we lay them out like a child bringing his or her list to the lap of Santa at Macy's. Here, however, we have a beautiful example of a prayer from a prophet of God in a time of bewilderment, and in it there is much for us to learn about our prayer lives.

First of all, the final verse of the prayer is Jeremiah's inquiry. It is posed in the form of an implied question:

"Behold, the siege mounds have come up to the city to take it, and because of sword and famine and pestilence the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans who are fighting against it. What you spoke has come to pass, and behold, you see it. Yet you, O Lord GOD, have said to me, 'Buy the field for money

and get witnesses' – though the city is given into the hands of the Chaldeans.” (32:24-25)

We should take note, though, that the request for understanding is the last verse, and only the last verse of the prayer. Here is how Jeremiah begins: *“Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you. You show steadfast love to thousands.” (32:17-18)*

For seven verses, Jeremiah extols God, lists his qualities and greatness, and then gets to his request. He begins by noting that God is the creator of the universe. What that means is that God created not only the heavens and the earth, but he created Jeremiah as well and knows his beginning from his end. Then the prophet praises God for his enduring love to all people. From the center of a prison cell, in the midst of strife and tumult, near the end of his pathos filled prophecy, Jeremiah praises God and God's love for people and prophet.

Through the rest of the prayer, Jeremiah praises God as all knowing, for being all powerful, and for being the great history maker. If God was able to arrange the Exodus from Egypt, certainly God can handle this matter of the Babylonians. When Jeremiah finally comes to God with his request, his prayer was seven parts praise and one part petition. By focusing his prayer time on God's greatness and goodness, he put his focus on the important thing – on God instead of his own confusion.

Good prayer requires good theology. If we do not know who our God is, then to whom do we pray? If our prayers are small and anemic, it might be because our God is small and anemic.

Begin your prayers this week by focusing your attention on God in all God's splendor and love, spend time there before you move on to your supplication, and see if it doesn't change your perspective and maybe even your situation. (Reference A

Prayer For The Confused: Jeremiah 32:16-25, Pastor Phil Steiger, Quail Lake Community Church, Colorado Springs, CO.).

May the divine pathos - made known to us in the prayers of the suffering servant Jeremiah – bring us to our knees this week in prayers that stretch to honesty and relationship with God that is beyond our belief. May we pray with Jeremiah, *“Heal me O Lord, and I shall be healed.”* Amen.

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