

Pentecost 12, August 31, 2014



Preaching under the Cross

Jeremiah 15:15–21

Introduction:

Dear Friends in Christ.

Our meditation for this Sunday is based on the Old Testament reading of Jeremiah chapter 15.

Jeremiah was a prophet through whom God spoke to His people back in his day, a preacher very much like our preachers today, and by our standards preachers need to be successful, don't they?

Imagine being in church one day and the preacher is none other than Jeremiah himself. Wow, that would be great, that would be something worth remembering always, and more, can we get more of his preaching? I mean, can we have him preach to us all the time, after all he is Jeremiah.

He might not be familiar to many of us, but that is what makes him interesting isn't it, it's sort of novel.

I'm sure Jeremiah was a stunning communicator. He had to be, to get people's attention. He had to be robust and direct, yet repetitive so that people got the message. So, imagine him being our preacher here at Faith Lutheran Church.

And if he were here today, he will understand our culture as well. Back then people were taking God for granted and treating Him as irrelevant; people were living to please themselves; people were pursuing dishonest gain, plotting and scheming ... but that is not much different from our culture today, so as you see he will understand our culture so well.

And he will be a novel preacher, because Jeremiah was hope filled. He not only spoke God's law and what happened when people broke it, but he also spoke words of reconciliation and forgiveness. So as you see Jeremiah could be seen as a successful preacher.

But, the reality was different. Things did not turn out well for Jeremiah. In fact he is known as the "weeping prophet." Back in his day he suffered opposition, imprisonment, and eventually death because he was a preacher of God's Word.

You might not know this, but today's preachers still suffer like Jeremiah did. Every faithful pastor has met the wrath of a hearer who was offended by some truth that he preached or practiced in his ministry.

Tim Peter in His article "10 Real Reasons Pastors Quit Too Soon" says that in the US, "More than 1,700 pastors leave the ministry every month. This staggering number includes some of the brightest, most inspiring pastors..." And two of the ten reasons are: 1) Discouragement and 2) Loneliness.

In another article Tom Rainer outlines "5 Tough Challenges for Any Pastor," which are: 1) Responding graciously to someone right before you preach. 2) Knowing what do with a staff member who is not making a vital contribution to the church. 3) Loving a person in the church when that person is your critic. 4) Preparing more than one quality sermon a week. 5) Doing the funeral of a person who was not a Christian.

Now, the purpose of this sermon is not for me as a pastor, to complain, whine or vent, but to share with you some of the difficulties that we pastors go through, some worse than the rest of us.

But it is not only pastors who suffer, faithful church members also go through what Jeremiah went through back in his day.

Every Christian has known the skepticism, the scorn, the dismissal that comes from taking a stand on some unpopular truth in God's Word. Even at home we do face criticism when we are spending much of our time in the work of the church.

As you see, Jeremiah's prophecy is as fresh and relevant today as it's ever been. Today also, faithful preaching and hearing of God's Word attracts opposition and suffering but despite persecution and rejections, faithful preaching still delivers the precious promises of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Friends we need to know that, and we need to be aware of that as well.

I. Jeremiah complains of sufferings, and God answers.

Jeremiah was fully aware of what he was suffering back then, but he did complain, he complained that the prophetic office was difficult and lonely. And it gets harder when you are sent something against your will, doesn't it? Jeremiah was made a prophet against his will, when he was still young. He was sent to preach an unpopular message to people who were hostile to God's Word (14:10). And as a result he suffered their enmity (15:15).

Jeremiah felt like a failure, which in our day is another reason why pastors quit too soon. His hearers did not believe him when he spoke for God (15:20). God did not listen to him when he tried to intercede on behalf of the people (14:11; 15:1). Jeremiah was regarded as a curse in the land (15:10).

So he did complain, he complained to God, he complained that he bore reproach on account of God's Word (15:15). He was filled with indignation and sharp pain (15:17–18). In his despair, he even accused God of deceit and unfaithfulness (15:18): "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?"

But, as the theme of our National church this year is: "Come to Him who answers prayers," God did hear Jeremiah and answered his prayers. God responded to Jeremiah's complaint with a call to repentance and with Gospel promises.

God asked Jeremiah to repent of his doubt: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth." (v 19)

After all God gave him joy in his words (v 16), promising salvation, deliverance, redemption (vv 20–21). He himself says: "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."

God promised to establish and bless Jeremiah in his vocation and office (vv 19–21). God said: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. ... 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, declares the LORD. ²¹ I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless."

II. Christian preachers and hearers often experience the prophet's troubles, but they also receive his promises.

Friends, I have come to the conclusion that what God judges is not the outcome of our doings, our success or numbers, but our faithfulness. Faithfulness in God's word, faithfulness in doing His work, faithfulness in being His child, in your faith confession, then numbers will happen. We hear from Jesus in the parable of the talents, saying: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." (Mat. 25:23)

That's what God want's Jeremiah to see, faithfulness. How is our faithfulness, yours and mine today? Do we identify with Jeremiah, both in our sins and doubts, and also in our failures?

Preachers may struggle with the awareness of their own shortcomings, failures, and sins. They may sometimes be plagued with doubt and despair. The Word of God may seem to receive little success, and the preacher's prayers may seem to fall to the ground unheard.

Church members also share in the reproach of the Gospel. You may share in the struggles of your pastors and even suffer the same persecution (1 Pet 4:12–19).

So, there are times when we, pastor and member may complain to God and question his faithfulness, therefore failing in our own faithfulness.

But to both, God calls us to repentance, as he did Jeremiah. He turns us so that we are turned away from sin and unbelief and now look to him for grace and mercy, for He does give us strength and boldness to remain faithful as He did with Jeremiah. God gave him, and directly to us today, His great and precious promises through His Word. He promises to make us stand before God. He makes the ministry of the Gospel a fortified and impregnable city for us, which is able to withstand the attacks of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. Yes He does bestow salvation, deliverance, and redemption to all who believe his Word.

III. In Jeremiah's words we recognize the suffering of Christ and the salvation he died to give us.

After all in Christ already our reproach was dealt with, Christ himself was filled with indignation at our disregard of God's Word (v 17), and suffer our perpetual pain and incurable wound (v 18). His blood is our full redemption price; His death is our deliverance; His resurrection is our salvation and justification, and when we remain in Him His faithfulness is our faithfulness.

We preachers of the Gospel will share in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24), bearing the cross of Christ in the vocation of the Holy Ministry. But in this ministry, the promises given to Jeremiah are delivered to preacher and hearers alike, and Christ is revealed to give mercy to those who suffer for his sake.

All Christians bear the cross (Mt 16:24) for the sake of Christ. But where the cross of Christ is willingly borne and the precious Gospel of Jesus' cross is preached and heard and believed, there the Church of Christ stands before God (15:19) and overcomes all her oppressors (vv 20–21).

Conclusion:

Jeremiah's example and words direct us back to the faithful preaching of the Word of God, where Christ is revealed and salvation is delivered. There we find

ourselves in a strong and impregnable city, where we live secure in God's eternal forgiveness and love. Amen.