

Between the Rock and a Hard Place

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Romans 6:1-11

If you think manipulation and intimidation are new tactics in human conflict, think again. Some six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah and the high priest Pashhur went at each other with a ferocity that would feel familiar today. Well into their long-running feud, Jeremiah heard God telling him to smash a clay jar against one of the gates of Jerusalem. Then he shouted, “Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'So I will break this people and this city.'” Finally, Jeremiah entered the Temple and proclaimed, “Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, 'Behold I bring against this city all the evil I have pronounced against it, because they have...refused to hear my words.’” In response, Pashhur had the Temple guards beat Jeremiah and put him in the stocks.

After twenty-four hours in manacles, Jeremiah delivered one of his several prophecies that the Lord would erase Judah and send its surviving residents into slavery in Babylon. Then he broke into the lament we just read. Jeremiah starts with an accusation that God has deceived him. He, Jeremiah, has faithfully delivered all God's threats against a stiff-necked people, but they have yet to come true. This has made Jeremiah a laughing stock. Yet, Jeremiah continues, if he tries not to preach what God gives him to say, the message burns within him. He is stuck between the Rock—God—and a hard place: the derision of the people.

Still, Jeremiah continues, he will remain faithful to the prophetic calling. The Lord is with him as “a dread warrior”. God will let him see “thy vengeance upon them, for to thee have I committed my cause.” Who are today's prophets? Who feels the prickly Word of the Lord burning within? Who knows that if they speak they will become targets of people without scruple or human decency? Who nevertheless trusts in the Lord's protection for as long as they faithfully deliver the messages God gives them? To me, the most sure answer is those men and women, of any skin color, who cry out for justice for all skin colors. I would add one qualification: I believe nearly all true prophets today call for justice to be achieved by non-violent means.

My friend Ron and I have a number of things in common. We both married saints. We both love baseball. We're about the same age and height. We both pastor Presbyterian Churches. And we both have sons-in-law named Sam. Ron's Sam, however, is African-American. After Ron's Sam married Meagan, the young couple moved to San Diego so he could pursue his master's degree. They lived there two years. In that time, Sam got pulled over **nine** times by Caucasian cops. He did not receive a single ticket. Indeed, he could not remember a single time he had done anything wrong, except that one cardinal offense: DWB. Driving While Black.

Ron is a reasonably conservative guy. His theology and politics are clearly right of mine. But as he told me in a phone conversation this week, “With Sam in our lives, we think **very** differently about race issues. Our eyes have been opened to how common prejudice and injustice are.” I asked Ron whether his family talked about the

events and issues being fought over today. All the time, he said. He shared a comment Sam had made: “Until we find the voices of the true black prophets, nothing is going to get better.” Sam welcomes people of all skin colors when they sincerely seek justice and equality. But he feels it is critical that African-Americans have the plurality of leadership roles in the cause. Sam also feels it is crucial that the community work hard to discern who those true prophets are. Who seems to have the charity of God in their hearts? Who has the strength of character to withstand the assassination attempts—on Twitter and in the real world? Who does not change their messages to pander to the mobs?

Jeremiah had that charity, that courage, that consistency. It made him the enemy of the powerful. Yet he continued preaching God's messages. May God rise up in our nation, and right soon, men and women cut from that same bolt of cloth.

The Apostle Paul also found himself between the Rock and a hard place. After arguing in his letter to the Romans that Christ's death has freed all who believe in him from the consequences of sin, he turns in our passage today to a vexing question. “Well,” Paul's legalistic opponents ask, “if as you say God's grace abounds all the more when sin abounds, shouldn't we sin all the more?” Of course these legalists do not really mean sin is good. Quite the contrary: their main problem with Paul is that he seems to say that a strict keeping of God's law no longer matters. Unable to oppose Paul's argument with cogent arguments of their own, they go after him personally. They mock him. We see a fair amount of that happening on cable television today.

Though insincere, the question of grace and sin abounding stalked Paul throughout his ministry. Here in Romans 6 he delivers his best rebuttal to his opponents on the issue. Thoroughly paraphrased, his argument runs like this:

1. ***Of course we should not sin all the more.***
2. Once we die to the consequences of sin—which are death itself—we enter life with Christ.
3. Baptism dramatizes this truth: the water drowns the sin.
4. The resurrection of Christ dramatizes this truth: when we walk with Jesus we walk with newness of life.
5. Christ died and rose again. Therefore those who follow him will, too.
6. I, Paul, am not here speaking literally of life after death (though I do believe in that for those who follow Jesus).
7. I, Paul, am speaking rather of a new experience of life, a life filled with the gifts of the Spirit: peace, patience, hope, faith and preeminently, love.
8. But entering into that new life carries a cost.

A certain sweater-wearing basketball coach who met with a great deal of success at my alma mater was fond of saying, “Everybody wants to win. Few want to pay the price of ***preparing*** to win.” Almost everybody wants to live the new life in Christ. Not everybody is prepared to pay the price to obtain it. Paul refers to that price throughout our passage. It is a core theme of Romans 6. And it is death. Christ died on the cross. We must be “united with him in a death like his.” Paul means we must become dead to sin. Dying to sin frees us from sin. All of which focuses us beautifully

on **the** question Romans 6 must make us ask: How do we “die to sin”?

For Paul, the answer is to become “in Christ”. He fleshes out what this means in virtually every letter of his we find in the New Testament. The bedrock foundation of being “in Christ” is having faith in him as Lord and Savior, believing that he is God, that he died like human beings do, that he rose from the dead, that he offers us abundant life. Being in Christ also means seeking to obey his teachings. Obedience does not purchase that new life for us. Only a legalist would argue that. But obedience is an act of gratitude that has the incredible blessing also of making our little corners of the world more Christ-like. Finally, being in Christ means having the peace of Christ in our hearts, that Blessed Assurance that he has rescued us from ourselves, and last but definitely not least, that peace **can** break out in this world.

It is appallingly easy to find videos of people assaulting each other in these days of unrest. But for every clip showing an anarchist setting fire to a Wendy's, or of yet another white cop killing an African-American, we can also find clips of incredibly brave people putting themselves in danger to protect strangers, or of demonstrators hugging riot cops. A Facebook friend of mine recently took her children to a rally. When I first read this I admit I thought, “Hmmm. Pretty sure I would not have taken my children when they were that age.” But in her post-attendance report this woman wrote of an African-American woman who asked if she could hug her children. (She explained she was asking not because of their whiteness, but because of the virus.) The mother said sure. The lady gathered the two children in one embrace and said, “You babies

are children of God. Don't you ever forget that." And then, of course, the two women had a tearful hug.

As I mentioned last week, we Jesus followers respond to the conflicts around us with various actions. I continue to support them all. We have been given the calling of making the love of Jesus real in a world that desperately needs it. We have been given stewardship of the Gospel. Grateful obedience to God for having given us abundant life requires that we do what we can to help others appropriate the peace of Christ. How might we spread the peace of Christ? By listening to others with respect and attention. By reminding ourselves of the core values of our faith and conducting honest self-examinations of whether we're living them. By taking the risk of crossing boundaries with love.

The Mission Committee here at Central has begun exploring concrete ways we can establish connections across racial lines in Terre Haute. We will speak more of their work when they settle on specifics. In the meanwhile, prepare to pay the cost of discipleship. Accept the power of the Holy Spirit as it seeks to put to death your slavery to sin. Believe in Jesus. **Act** like Jesus. Find ways to express his all-inclusive love to every kind of child of God. Nurture his peace in your heart and spread it through acts of kindness. Abundant life carries a cost. To have it we must allow God to put to death our old ways. But it turns out those old ways cannot compare in worth to the new. Pay the price. Give yourself to God. Then give yourself to God's children.

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