

CHILDREN=S SERMON¹

Theme: God is all-knowing and all-loving.

Object: A jar filled with jelly beans

Scripture: *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.* Matthew 10: 29-30 [NIV]

When I was a child, I would sometimes go into a store and see a large jar filled with beans. There would be a contest to see who could guess how many beans were in the jar. The one who guessed the nearest to the correct number would win a prize.

Can you guess how many jelly beans are in this jar? (*Allow some time for them to guess.*) Actually, there are 200 jelly beans in this jar. Some of you came close, and some weren't very close at all.

Wouldn't it be amazing if someone could take one look at this jar and tell you exactly how many jelly beans are in the jar? That would be pretty amazing!

But let me tell you something more amazing than that! The Bible tells us that God knows exactly how many hairs are on your head. Look around the room . . . Some of us have a lot of hair and some don't have very much. It doesn't matter how much or how little hair you have, God knows how many hairs are on each person's head! The Bible also says that God knows exactly how many birds are in the air and if one of them dies and falls to the ground, God knows it! If God cares when a little sparrow falls to the ground, can you imagine how much he cares for you?

Well, I'll tell you how much God cares for you. He cares for you so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross so that you could have everlasting life. Now, that's amazing love!

Prayer: Dear Father, we are thankful that we have a God who knows everything about us and loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

¹Based on AHe Cares for You, @ Sermons for Year A, Proper 7, <https://www.sermons4kids.com/comforter.htm>.

ADULT SERMON

Theme: Jesus commissions us to speak as he has spoken and do as he has done

Anyone for dying? That's how a celebrated preacher once began a sermon on today's scripture readings. Despite the theme from today's children's sermon about how God even knows how many hairs are on each of our heads, today's scripture readings from Jeremiah and Matthew are not easy. If you listened carefully, you may, like me, have wanted to tune them out rather quickly. Right after Jeremiah laments *I have become a laughingstock all day long* (Jer. 20:7c). Maybe sooner than that for the gospel reading from Matthew. Even the Psalm this morning is a lament. These readings make it quite clear that trying to follow God's will and being a Christian disciple will be challenging and full of risk. So, **Anyone for Dying?**

The first reading this morning is a **lament** spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah grew up in a suburb of Jerusalem during the late 7th century, BCE. God called him to be a prophet right at the time the Babylonian empire was at its height with an army sweeping through the Middle East in a rampage of conquest and devastation (early 6th cy). Just prior to Jeremiah's lament in today's reading, he had prophesied, in a most dramatic fashion, what would happen to Jerusalem for all their evil deeds when the Babylonian army arrives. He had taken a clay pot and smashed it to smithereens (Jer. 19:1-15). Frederick Buechner has written of Jeremiah:

*There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn't denounce. He denounced the kings and the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital jamborees. He denounced the rich for exploiting, and he denounced the poor for deserving no better. He denounced the way every new god that came sniffing around had them all after him like so many bitches in heat; and right at the very gates of the Temple he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on in there, they ought to have their heads examined.*²

Jeremiah's prophetic words and visual clay pot demonstration did NOT go over very well with the people. The chief priest in the Temple had Jeremiah arrested, beaten, and put into stocks in jail. It's then that Jeremiah writes the lament we heard this morning, found in chapter 20. A lament that poetically reveals the interior crisis of **soul** that Jeremiah is experiencing:

*^{20:7}O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed;
you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.
^{10b}All my close friends are watching for me to stumble.*

In spiritual and psychological despair, Jeremiah cries out:

*^{8b}For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.
⁹If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.*

²*Peculiar Treasures*, pp.66-67

Though Jeremiah did not find being a prophet of doom much fun, he nonetheless continued because he had been grabbed by the power of God. He went on prophesying a word of doom because he could not do otherwise.

William Temple, who served as the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944, once wrote:

*If what you have gained from your religion is something you could possibly hold to yourself without wanting to impart it to others, then it is not God's best gift in the gospel. The fact you are not passing it along proves you haven't got it. If you have it, it will make you pass it on because of what it is.*³

Some of you may remember the renewal song from the 1960s, *Pass It On*. When you've been grabbed by the gospel, you can't help but pass it on:

*It only takes a spark to get a fire going,
And soon all those around can warm up to its glowing,
That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it.
You spread his love to everyone, you want to pass it on.*⁴

Today's Gospel from Matthew, chapter 10, is Jesus' great sermon on mission that he delivers to his disciples as he is about to send them out into the world. Last Sunday we read how Jesus gathered his twelve disciples together and commissioned them to go out: to **say** the same things he has been **saying**; to **do** the same things he has been **doing**. Then he confers on them the power to accomplish this mission. That's great Good News B to participate in Jesus' own mission; to share Jesus' own authority. But, AAnyone for Dying@? Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, writes: AWhen Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.@

Jesus told his disciples, *I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves* (10:16). That's a sobering thought to anyone who's considering being a disciple. And it gets worse: Jesus says that those who share in his mission to the world will be dragged before political authorities; they will be beaten up; they'll be betrayed by friends, betrayed by family. As one author has put it: AMinisters of the gospel need to be prepared for >gospel= conflict.@ If we are faithful to the call of God and proclaim the word of the Lord, we need to know that not everyone will welcome us. Jesus makes it very clear that there is a cost involved in following Him.

A few years ago I had an interesting interaction with a woman who had recently returned to the church and was full of fervor for Jesus. She had experienced a difficult childhood and had become deeply addicted to alcohol. But through the ministry of AA and her encounter with Christ through a Christian community, she was in recovery and was experiencing a life filled with joy B a joy she wanted to share; a joy she was compelled to share. She had felt led to start a new Alanon meeting at the church I was serving at the time. But I soon found her sitting in the back pew one Sunday with her eyes full of tears. When I asked what was wrong, she shared that many of her AA colleagues were beginning to give her funny looks,@ telling her that she was becoming a fanatic and too Areligious.@ Her reaction to this response from her friends was fear:

³Quoted in *LectionAid*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (March-May, 2002) 17.

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maybe this wasn't what God had wanted her to do; maybe starting a new Alanon meeting at the church would not work. She feared rejection by friends and colleagues. For this woman, being a follower of Jesus was proving very difficult.

But there's another piece to Jesus' warnings into today's gospel. There is also the promise of GOD'S CONSOLATION. Three times, Jesus tells his followers **not to fear**:

! ²⁶"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

! ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul;

! ³¹Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows (not even a sparrow falls to the ground without God knowing).

In other words, we don't need to fear whatever happens as we follow the call to mission. Why? because God is still in charge; God is sovereign. Nothing happens outside God's awareness. As we follow Christ's call, we have Jesus' own assurance that he is with us *Always, even to the end of the age* (28:20).

It is in this hope and with this faith that we can boldly go out as disciples of Jesus. Although we might experience trepidation and fear at what the future may bring, that's when we need to remember the words of Jesus: *Have no fear . . .*

There is a wonderful story (author unknown) about a woman who had great hopes that her young son might grow up to become a concert pianist. Wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, she took the boy to a Paderewski⁵ concert. After they were seated, the mother spotted a friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually found his way through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE." When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat only to discover that her son had disappeared. Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway grand on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." I suspect that had the boy looked up and noticed the vastness of the now exposed concert hall with all the stage lights glaring, he would have been frozen in fear. But at that moment Paderewski, the great piano master, made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "**Don't quit. Keep playing.**" Then leaning over and somewhat surrounding the boy, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience that mesmerized the audience.

That's the way it is with our Lord. He doesn't promise that there might not be difficult times as we venture forth into mission. But he does promise to be with us and work with us so that we need have no fear. What we can accomplish on our own is hardly noteworthy, but with the hand of the Master, our mission wherever we are called, can truly be beautiful. As we go out from

⁵Ignacy Jan Paderewski, GBE (Polish: [iɫɔnat sɔjan padɛɔɾɛfsk i]; 18 November [O.S. 6 November] 1860 B 29 June 1941) was a Polish pianist and composer, politician and spokesman for Polish independence.[1] He was a favorite of concert audiences around the world. His musical fame opened access to diplomacy and the media. (Wikipedia)

these pews, whether to the VBS this week here at NJLC, to the mission field in our place of business or school, in our homes, to our neighbors, listen carefully for the voice of our Master, whispering in our ear and saying, "***Fear not. Don't quit. Keep playing.***" Know that His strong arms are surrounding each one of us, helping to turn our attempts into true Masterpieces. Jesus calls each one of us and this congregation to share in his mission to the world.