

Pentecost 10 Proper 15 – Year C – Track 2 - 8-18-2019

“Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” – Those words from our first reading from Jeremiah are harsh. They are harsh if we think we or what we have is going to be consumed by the fire, or if the rock being broken into pieces is the rock on which we’re standing or the rock on which our home is built. Jeremiah – who does speak of consolation for God’s people in his later chapters – speaks strongly here. God is not pleased with the prophets and kings who have promoted false images of who God is, who have painted beautiful pictures of the future to shore up their own power, while the lives of the poor are forsaken. God is not pleased. The difference between God’s word and what is being spoken, we are told, is like the difference between straw and wheat... Straw *has* no life, but wheat is the very *staff* of life. The image is fairly clear. God’s fiery word will burn up the straw... God’s word will hammer rock into dust. And that is the word which poor Jeremiah is carrying.

United Methodist Pastor Alphonetta Wines puts it this way: “Fire is the word that God uses to describe the message that Jeremiah is to convey. This is the same word, ‘a fire shut up in my bones,’ that Jeremiah himself used in 20:9 to describe that message and the overwhelming *tension within* that it caused. God compares the word that Jeremiah is to bring to a hammer that breaks rock into pieces. This would *have to be* a hard word in order to be sufficient to the difficulties that lay ahead. This would be a word that people would not want to hear.”¹

Indeed. For more words that we don’t want to hear, we have only to turn to today’s Gospel. Now it is Jesus who says, “‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’” “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” We are not accustomed to hearing this kind of talk from Jesus. We don’t like division. We don’t want to offend.

But the point of what Jesus is saying here is the hard truth that the gospel, the *values* of the gospel, are – most often - in conflict with the powers that be. Remember what we have heard in Luke’s Gospel to this point: Mary’s song about the God who lifts up the lowly and casts down the mighty; Jesus’ proclamation from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to let the oppressed go free...” For the past few weeks we have heard Jesus talk in parable about what God’s justice looks like, and what real treasure is.

Hearing the cries of the poor, wrestling with the truth that our greed to *have more than we need* is really idolatry, these things make us uncomfortable. Yes, Jesus brings the fire of God's passion. And the gospel, if we really follow it, can be divisive.

There are some very sticky issues for us to face these days. As a nation, we have foreign policy, immigration, guns, poverty, drug epidemics, climate change, care for the environment as a whole, racism, and sexual identity issues. We likely have several different opinions about any of these issues in this space today. We certainly have differences of opinions in our families – father against son, daughter against mother, as Jesus said. I know the talk among my clergy brothers and sisters about the tension involved in preaching the Gospel without offending. We don't want to cause division.

Jesus says, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Some folks look at events in the world today and interpret them as signs that we are on the cusp of repeating a history we promised never to repeat. Others say that things are great. So perhaps mostly we don't talk about these things – at least not in public. And so this Gospel passage makes us uncomfortable.

But Cláudio Carvalhaes, Associate Professor of Worship at Union Seminary in New York, has this to say about this Gospel. He has been discussing why we have difficulties with Jesus' talk about division, and he says:

"Another problem is that white Protestantism cannot deal with conflict. It is hard to deal with communities that contend, that engage in discussions, and remain with differences. For us churches, either everyone agrees, or I have to look for another church. No, I want a church that engages into this conflict, with people that agree to be different in different issues, and stay together even in places of contention and antagonism so that we can worship God with and because of our differences, and as we have our differences we struggle for what we think is right until we change and then we change each other and we move each other as we go."²

This gives us a new reading of Paul's letter to the Corinthians when he talks about the metaphor of the body. In our eagerness to have conformity and to think that is the best measure of community, Paul says there are some who are eyes and some who are feet; some who are ears, and some who are arms, because some difference in gifts is essential for the body and for the

church. Postmodern theorists about community will say that the most essential ingredient of community is difference – different viewpoints, different perspectives, different abilities – because without difference we never become community.

Difference... that takes me back to that first reading about the hammer smashing the rock. Whether that seems harsh or threatening or not depends on where you are. If you have a luxurious home built on the rock, and God's word is going to break the rock into pieces, that sounds terrible. But if you are penned in by rock walls and God is going to break those rocks to pieces, then that is good news indeed. The Gospel of Jesus is good news to the poor, because it demands justice. Carvalhaes says, "Justice will always upset those in power, those who have against those who do not have." It would serve us well to read the Gospel from the perspective of ones *not* privileged... the ones not in power... the ones who do *not* have so much.

Again, Carvalhaes says "We invoke peace to prevent any conversation about justice." What that means is that we say nothing so that we don't rock the boat or cause discord – and injustice remains. I'm thinking about the poor mice again, and the children at the border, the people of El Paso and Dayton.

But Frank Logue, the Bishop's Canon in Georgia and a member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, says this: "Shalom, God's true and lasting peace, calls us to stand against injustice. Any time we preserve the peace at someone or some group's expense, we trade God's shalom for a poor imitation."³

So let us abandon the practice of avoiding conflict under the pretense of keeping the peace. Let us engage in the hard work of justice even as we grapple with our differences. There we will find the body of Christ. Amen.

- [Jeremiah 23:23-29](#) [Psalm 82](#) [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#) [Luke 12:49-56](#)

¹ Alphonetta Wines, United Methodist Pastor https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2949

² Cláudio Carvalhaes, Associate Professor of Worship, Union Seminary, New York <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/c38-the-thirteenth-sunday-after-pentecost/>

³ The Rev. Canon Frank Logue. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/cost-true-peace-pentecost-10-c-august-18-2019>