

“Journeying with Jeremiah, Part Two: The Indictment”
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 28th (15th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Jeremiah 2: 4-13

Last week we met the prophet Jeremiah: we were witnesses to his call. This week...this week we hear a portion of some of the earliest oracles Jeremiah offered Ancient Israel. In other words: this week we learn of the charges he brought forth...the indictment he laid at the feet of his beloved people.

At the outset, it can be helpful to hear the way in which Jeremiah prefaces his indictment. Our reading this morning began at the fourth verse of Jeremiah's second chapter. But listen to the first three verses of that crucial chapter.

*And the word of the LORD came to me:
“Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:
Thus said the LORD: I remember about you,
your bridal devotion, your engagement love.
Your going after me in the wilderness
in a land not sown.
Something holy was Israel to the LORD,
the first-fruits of his harvest.*

What those opening verses present is an idealized account of the Hebrew slaves who had escaped from bondage, having entered into a sparkingly new relationship with the God who had set them free and then guided them through the 40 year wilderness sojourn. Borrowing a page from the prophet Hosea, Jeremiah depicts Israel's initial relationship with God as that of a smitten bride with her newly wed husband. That's the context—the context of a golden age of faithful devotion—that sets the stage for Jeremiah's indictment.

*Hear the word of the LORD, house of Jacob,
and all the tribes of the house of Israel:
Thus said the LORD: “What did your fathers find wrong in me
that they wandered far from me?
They went after The Nothing and became nothing.
They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD
who brought us up from the land of Egypt
who led us in the wilderness in a land of desert and pit,
in a land of drought and death shadow,
in a land through which a person does not pass
and a human being does not dwell there?’
The Priests did not say, ‘Where is the LORD?’;
those handling the law did not know me.*

*The shepherds rebelled against me, the prophets prophesied by Ba'al.
Therefore I still have a grievance with you
and with your children's children I will have a grievance!
The Word of the LORD!*

To put it succinctly: the indictment Jeremiah here launches against his people is that of unfaithfulness. In this he echoes others of the prophets: not at all surprising given the rather unique circumstance in which Ancient Israel found itself. Called out from bondage under the leadership of Moses, brought to Mount Sinai where they are offered a covenant—the first provision of which involves the promise that they owe **exclusive** loyalty to the One God, the God who had broken their chains and set them free—they subsequently found themselves planted in a Mediterranean world in which an endless array of gods and goddesses filled the very air they breathed. It was the thankless task of Jeremiah and his fellow prophets, to bring to Israel's attention their guilt: their guilt in having abandoned the exclusivity of the love they owed their God, their guilt in wanting to have it both ways: wanting to worship **their** God, but wanting to also spend time at the altars of the Ba'als, the Asherahs, and the countless other gods who dotted the landscape of the Ancient Near East. In the process, the distinctive vocation—the distinctive calling—that had been offered this people at Mount Sinai was gradually being eroded...lost beneath the confusing swirl of their idols, prompting and justifying Jeremiah's poignant question:

*Has a nation ever changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.*

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Our theme, this morning—and there is no getting around it—our theme this morning is idolatry. Without denying the extent to which Jeremiah and the other prophets were appalled by injustice—the rich trampling the poor—they inevitably grounded their concerns about such injustice by speaking first and foremost of the injustice their people had committed by turning their back on God. Thus the heart of Jeremiah's indictment: an indictment in which he accuses his people of dabbling in the worship of alternative gods: gods which, according to the prophet, were no gods at all. From the earliest beginning of his ministry until he drew his final breath, Jeremiah remains a sturdy witness—at times a heartbroken witness—summoning Ancient Israel away from the worship of the Ba'als, the idols that had distracted them from the exclusive allegiance they owed to the One God: maker of heaven and earth, breaker of the chains of slavery. And yes: it is through the witness of those such as Jeremiah—through the work and witness of the Israelite prophets—that the issue of idolatry has become one with which each generation of Christians has had no choice but to wrestle.

That ongoing struggle has taken many shapes and many forms. At times it has produced intense in-house controversy concerning the use of images. Here at Trinity, where we share a worship space with Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, an issue that still divides our different faith traditions involves the use of images as well as devotion to what Catholics call saints but many Protestants regard as substitute gods. The fact that Trinity Catholic has a statue of the Blessed Virgin conveniently placed on wheels—so that it can be easily moved into the sanctuary for their worship and just as easily wheeled back out for our worship---testifies to the fact that we are not of a common mind on such things. While we can smile at such an arrangement—and take some pride in our willingness to compromise over such things—the fact remains that there have been times in the history of the Christian Church in which disagreement over the use of images was no laughing matter; times when churches were ransacked and lives lost, in a desire either to smash or to defend the saints and their images in the church. That’s just one instance—and especially poignant instance—of the tough conversations that are inevitable in a tradition that frowns on idolatry.

Another example. As a pastor in a liberal Church tradition—during the final decades of the 20th century and the opening decades of the 21st century—I provide leadership within the context of a denomination that has entered into heartfelt dialogue with what we call the great World religions, Christianity taking its place side by side with Judaism and Islam, side by side with Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism as well as a wide range of indigenous spiritualities. But surely we all know of churches—and I certainly know of United Church colleagues—who regard all such dialogue as deeply problematic, who believe that we have nothing worthwhile to learn from people of other faiths. I believe them to be wrong. I believe that it is not simply unfair—but unfaithful to the ninth commandment (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour!”) when we equate, for example, the subtle truths of Buddhism with the fertility rites and human sacrifices of man ancient religions. That having been said: I believe that when we do encounter people from other faith in genuine dialogue, that when it is our turn to speak, we will have little to contribute when we fail to name the name of Jesus Christ.

Beyond that? Beyond that, it’s worth nothing the extent to which talk of idols and idolatry opens floodgates to a raft of issues upon which we preachers love to pontificate. Do I have a problem with consumerism? Ah yes: what a great opportunity is handed me when I can compare the modern consumer to a worshipper of ancient idols! Am I down on the sexual revolution? Wonderful: I can speak with tremendous zeal of the danger that happens when a whole culture begins to turn sexuality into its god, an insatiable god that must be worshipped above all else! Do I see fossil fuels as the real problem facing humanity? Excellent: that too can be cast as a form of idolatry, a new god that we worship with our automobiles and our fast-paced life-styles. You get the picture! Jeremiah’s indictment of **his** culture opens up the possibility for me, as a preacher, to shoot at a wide array of tempting targets in **our** culture, all of

which—to be fair—**can** be aptly critiqued as potential forms of idolatry. Given the truth of John Calvin’s assertion that “man’s mind is a storehouse of idolatry”, the list of targets is endless. Which target will I select for this morning’s screed?

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Well: no matter how often I go around the block on this, the only appropriate target—or so it seems to me—the only appropriate target for such a screed, is the target I catch of glimpse of, when I look in the mirror. The problem of right worship—the challenge of devoting my life to God and the inevitable temptation of substituting an idol for the living God—that challenge, above all, is **my** challenge, **my** temptation, **my** struggle. When I refocus in that way, two words present themselves loudly and clearly.

The first of those words is the word “addiction”. The remarkable mathematical genius who also happened to be a profound Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, wrote that there is a “God-size hole” in the human heart. Anytime we try to squeeze something other than God into that hole, we are involved in a subtle—but far from insignificant—act of idolatry. And yes: one way to identify those substitutes is to think about the things we just can’t live without. To be sure, not all of us become falling down drunks or back-alley druggies. But we all have habitual patterns which, if we ponder them, can reveal the places where we have built an idol, an idol that may well provide essential clues about ways in which we hide from the presence of the living God! Make no mistake about it: there is a correlation between what Jeremiah calls idolatry, and what we moderns call addiction.

The other word that comes to mind—and this may come as a surprise—is the word “atheism”. Yes, atheism. Not the loud aggressive atheism of the Christopher Hitchens, the Richard Dawkins, and the Sam Harris’ who debunk the reality of God: sometimes in the name of science, sometimes in revulsion against the horrors we all-too-often commit in the name of religion. No! Not that sort of brash, can’t stop talking about how much we dislike “god” sort of atheism, rather the **functional** atheism: in other words, the atheism of those who worship on Sunday...

...including those who preach on Sunday...

...but then go about their business the rest of the week, without giving their God so much as a second thought. It is so easy to live that way; trust me, I know. And ultimately...ultimately it can be a betrayal of everything we profess here when we find ourselves living so forgetfully. Failing to remember....

...failing to remember not only our God, but the One true Israelite...the One faithful Jew...the one for whom Jeremiah and the other

prophets yearned. The one who, far from espousing atheism of either the philosophical or functional variety, grounded his entire being—his every breath—in devotion to the one he called Abba. Papa. Father!

We have a name for that faithful one. We call him Jesus. And to follow in **His** footsteps is to be summoned not only to the remembrance of **His** way of devotion, but to live in active expectation of that time when **His** devotion to the God of the prophets—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob—will be so woven into our own hearts and minds, that through all of life's chances and changes, we will be radiant with the love of God.

May it be so! In His blessed name! Amen!