



“This is the Temple of the Lord – If You Act Justly with One Another”

Scripture – Jeremiah 7:1-11

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, October 13, 2019

While some imagine that faith is almost exclusively focused on worship, prayer, and what you believe, others construe faith as spreading love and righting wrongs. The term Prophetic Spirituality encapsulates the entire life of faith by wedding these two concepts. We are spotlighting several of the Jewish prophets because we hear echoes of their voices in the teachings of Jesus.

Being a prophet was no accolade. It was more like a curse. God placed a tremendous burden on each prophet, so it is no wonder that some of them resisted their call. Like Moses before him, when God called Jeremiah to prophecy, his response was not, “Here I am, Lord,” but rather, “No, not I, Lord!”

Jeremiah doubted he was up to the assignment, and he surely did not aspire to become a prophet of doom. But that was the albatross God hung around his neck.

Today’s focus is the sermon Jeremiah delivered at the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem. Our passage does not indicate the occasion, but Biblical scholars believe it was no ordinary day. Some scholars speculate that it was the inauguration of Jehoiakim as king. Others suggest it was a major pilgrimage festival. Regardless of the occasion, Jeremiah’s words provoked such a visceral reaction that he was dragged away to prison.

Jeremiah’s prophecy dealt with two weighty matters: First, the Temple as an enduring safe haven, and second, the faith community’s responsibility for the wellbeing of everyone in society.

It helps to know that a century earlier, Judah had been devastated by the Assyrians, but the Temple in Jerusalem had survived. So the notion took hold that God would “never let the Temple be harmed and it would protect everyone who worshiped there from danger...(Many believed that the Temple was) a kind of protective shield over Jerusalem that could not be penetrated.”¹ Jeremiah’s prophecy was intended to vaporize such thinking.

When Jeremiah said, “Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” he was mocking the people for their belief that the massive stone structure would be their everlasting safe haven. They imagined that regardless of how they treated their neighbor, if they showed up for worship all would be well. Jeremiah said, “Think again. God will abandon you unless you amend your ways.”

God called Jeremiah to skewer the hypocrisy of praying, singing hymns, and listening to the reading and interpreting of Scripture, and then walking out of the sanctuary and making a farce of their faith by living profanely.

Speaking through the prophet, God refuses to mince words. “If you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, THEN I will dwell with you in this place.”

Prophets are so deeply spiritual that they become conduits for God. They understand that God loves all people so profoundly that God cannot abide anyone being treated unfairly. So the prophets rage when the poor are ignored, when the foreigner is oppressed, and when widows are left to fend for themselves.

There is a fascinating detail in our passage that is easy to overlook. The text tells us precisely where Jeremiah is standing when he utters his prophecy. It does not merely say that Jeremiah is in Jerusalem when he spews God’s fury. Neither does it simply say that Jeremiah is at the Temple when he lets loose with his caustic condemnation. Our passage says that Jeremiah is standing at a specific spot. He positions himself “at the gate of the Lord’s house.”

In other words, Jeremiah stands at the threshold. On one side of the gate is the everyday world; on the other side is the sacred space for worship. Had Jeremiah been standing inside the Temple, he might have left the impression that there is a clear division between our spiritual life and our everyday life. Inside the Temple the focus is prayer and praise, outside the Temple is business and politics. Inside the Temple people revere God’s commands; outside the Temple they embrace society’s values. Inside God rules, outside the autonomous self rules.

But Jeremiah stood at the threshold with one foot inside the Temple and one foot outside to underscore his message that worship should shape how we live in the world. Worship should remind people of the necessity to live according to God’s commandments. But that was no longer the case, so God sent Jeremiah to express the divine outrage. Jeremiah said, “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, and chase after other gods and then come into the Temple and say, ‘We are safe!’ Has this house become a den of robbers?” Six hundred years later when Temple worship had once again become corrupt, Jesus leveled the same accusation. “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Luke 19:46)

The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is the official book of rules. It sets out our form of government and includes a theology of Christian worship. In the first two chapters on worship, it says, “We are gathered in worship to glorify the God who is present and active among us –particularly through the gifts of Word and Sacrament. We are sent out in service to glorify the same God who is present and active in the world.”² We glorify God in worship, then we are sent out to glorify God through service.

It goes on to say: “God sends the Church to show compassion in the world: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, freeing captives, sheltering the homeless, welcoming strangers, comforting those who mourn, and being present with all who are in need.”³

Each time we gather for worship, it is not for the purpose of appeasing God or telling God how wonderful God is, as if God needs an ego boost. We worship to express our gratitude for the blessings of life, to find comfort in times of suffering, to garner strength when we face stiff challenges, to glean hope when we despair, to discern how God wants us to live, and to be inspired to action. Theologian Richard Rohr says, “If your spiritual practice does *not* lead you to some acts of concrete caring or service, then you have every reason not to trust it.”⁴ Prophetic spirituality opens our eyes to the needs before us and challenges us to do something about them.

In the 16th century most people in Europe were poor and illiterate. John Knox pushed the church in Scotland to create schools to teach people to read. It was not merely an act of charity. It combined charity with social justice by helping to level the playing field. The ability to read opened up numerous opportunities for employment. It was an enormous leap forward in lifting people out of poverty. Centuries later, education continues to be a pillar of the Presbyterian Church.

A significant part of the ministry of Jesus involved healing, and as his hands and feet, God expects us to be healers. Christian churches have a long history of building hospitals and health care facilities. For centuries, the church built orphanages to care for children who were left without parents. Westminster created Daughtry House for AIDS patients in the early days of the disease when many who contracted what was then a death sentence, were rejected by their own families.

Today, in Guatemala, where spouse abuse is common, we support Rosario's health clinic to help women in need. Our church family warmly embraced a transgender member, supporting her family through her transformation with Christ-like compassion.

Theologian Joan Chittister writes, "For those who believe that the spiritual life is a commitment to personal comfort, security, and public respect...the call to prophetic spirituality is too much to ask. Still, for those who realize that the spiritual life is about following Jesus (and the prophets), nothing else is possible."⁵

Prophetic spirituality calls on us to deepen our bond with God; and one of the chief ways is by discerning the needs around us and throwing ourselves into action.

A colleague tells about his friend Walter who had a successful career as a business executive. When Walter retired, he felt God nudging him to put his faith into action. He lived near a home for paraplegics and quadriplegics, so one day he decided to organize a group of retired men to visit these residents to gain a better understanding of their special needs.

Very quickly, Walter discovered that most wanted help writing letters to family and friends. Walter and his retired friends would sit down with those unable to write and take dictation, writing down word for word what these individuals wanted to put in their letters.

Some of these sessions took more than an hour because the person in the wheel chair would depart from what he wanted in the letter to talk about feelings of despair and loneliness, about being abused and rejected.

As they finished writing each letter, Walter and the other men would always ask, "Can I pray with you?" And the answer was always, "Please do."

Walter often wondered if he and his band of letter writers were really making any difference in the lives of these wheelchair bound individuals. He was never certain.

Years later Walter died and his son tells about Walter's memorial service. As the service was about to begin, the son heard a commotion in the back of the church. He turned around to see what was happening. Ushers were scurrying all over the place. Then, down the center aisle came a man in a wheelchair. And behind it, there was another. Another man in a wheelchair started coming down one of the side aisles. Another one came down the other side. The next thing he knew there were people in wheelchairs streaming down all of the aisles until there were dozens of men in wheelchairs in that sanctuary!⁶ And Walter's son knew that because his father responded to the prophetic word not to forget those society often discards, dozens of people were touched by God's love.

Prophetic spirituality prompts changes in our lifestyle. We recycle, we switch to energy efficient light bulbs, and we buy more fuel efficient cars. We attend lectures on racism and violence to become aware of injustice, we lobby our legislators to make our laws fair, and we craft relationships with people of other races and religions. We become more generous with our time and our money so that lives are lifted.

May God's Spirit open our eyes to the broken and overlooked within our orbit. May the Spirit give us a stubborn will that refuses to despair in the face of setbacks. And may the Spirit douse our soul with hope so that you and I will spread light in places of darkness and God's dream for the world will advance.

NOTES

1. Patrick D. Miller, "The Book of Jeremiah," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VI*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 636.
2. *Book of Order*, W-1.0101 and W-1.0102.
3. *Book of Order*, W-5.0303.
4. Richard Rohr, "Practice: Divine Obedience," *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations*, July 13, 2019.
5. Joan Chittister, *The Time Is Now*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), p.82.
6. Thomas K. Tewell, "Putting Shoes on Our Faith," June 27, 2004.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Loving God, we hunger for a more robust faith and a closer connection with you. Deepen our bond and inspire our commitment because we know that if our relationship with you is tepid, it will be difficult to make our other relationships right.

As people of faith, we know that the wisdom of the prophets is far superior to our own ideas and opinions. In their teachings, we discover values that have endured for centuries and have proven to enrich people's lives. Their directives provide us with a solid moral foundation so that we can promote the common good.

Everlasting God, we pray that we may catch your vision of a world where each man, woman, and child is treated fairly, receives respect and experiences generosity.

God, our fear of change tempts us to become content with our life as it is. Nudge us out of our complacency and make us discontent with a life that is shallow in comparison to what it could be. Breathe new energy into our muscles that have grown weak and our wills that have grown indifferent. Open our hearts to your transforming Spirit so that we may embrace your summons to become more like Jesus and the prophets in all we say and do.

Inspire us to be a friend to someone who is lonely. Prompt us to be forgiving to one who has wronged us. Strengthen us to share the weight of one who is suffering. Prod us to be generous in supporting your church. Embolden us to improve conditions for those who barely get by. Motivate us to preserve your creation for those who come after us.

Spirit of hope, fill us with confidence that anticipates a better tomorrow and a determined will committed to making your dream visible in all parts of the planet. We pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.