

Sermon for April 13, 2008: Thus Says the Lord

Jeremiah 31: 2-7

Matthew 28: 16-20

Every morning, as part of the announcements at Hunterdon Central Regional High School, the students hear these words: This is Dr. Brady with a few words of wisdom. Dr. Brady then relays short stories, pithy quotes, ideas that are designed to provoke the students at Hunterdon Central, to recall to their minds what ethical, caring, responsible behavior looks like. I am not sure how attentive the students always are, but I am sure that they pay more attention to her than if a freshman student was on the PA saying, This is Joe/Jane Schmoe, with a few words of wisdom. The students may not always listen to Dr. Brady, but she regularly reminds them of what wonderful citizenship looks like.

In the same way, the prophets of the Lord would relay short stories, pithy words, sometimes songs that were intended to provoke the Israelites to recall to their minds what sorts of ethical, caring, responsible behavior that the Lord expected of them. The prophets would tell the Israelites what would happen if they listened to, or ignored, that call. They were great at describing the natural consequences of the peoples' behavior. They were also great at reminding the people of the loving-kindness of the Lord, and His care for them. The Israelites had hungry hearts, hearts that were longing for their home, since home is where the heart is. And what Jeremiah told them in today's reading would have been balm and encouragement for them. They are in exile in Babylon, and their hearts are hurting. They were living out the natural consequences of their behavior, and they were still in a state of denial. Jeremiah has a vision, a dream, a song or story that the Lord gives to him, and he shares that vision, that dream, that song or story with these devastated people. And so he utters those signal words to the people: Thus says the Lord... They will be going home again, and there will be a celebration when they get there; they have again found grace in the wilderness, because, as the Lord says, I have loved you with an everlasting love.

But humanity being what humanity is, we needed more. We needed a stronger demonstration of the wisdom and grace and everlasting love of the Lord, and so the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and wisdom and truth. Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. Jesus fed the hearts of those who heard His words, who heard His call to repentance and to new life in the Lord. Their hearts were hungry for the Good News of God's love. Jesus reminded the people of the importance of following the words of the Lord, and often held up against that the traditions of the elders, which over time tended to confuse following the words of the Lord with following the traditions. That is why Jesus spoke against tithing even the small things while at the same time not caring for elderly relatives, for instance. Jesus said that tithing was good; He also said not to use flashy gifts as an excuse to not care for those in need, especially parents and elderly relatives in need.

Jesus, as we know, was eventually killed for His efforts. And on the third day, because He was following what His Father called Him to do, He was resurrected. We know that the resurrected Lord spent time with His followers, reminding them of what they were to do – thus says the Lord. Finally, Matthew tells us of His final words to His followers, immediately before He

ascends to heaven. And even as He is preparing to go, even as they are worshipping Him, some still doubted.

That's interesting to me. Thus says the Lord – and yet some still doubted. What is that about? How on earth can they still doubt? Well, there may have been some there, the more cynical among them, who may have suspected that it was all somehow a trick. But I think that for man more, the changes that Jesus was calling them to were so daunting that they doubted that THEY were up to it. After all, Jesus was calling them to go out and lay hands on people and heal them, to preach the Good News, to teach, to baptize, to follow the word of the Lord, and not the traditions of the elders. That is a LOT of change. And change is scary.

Let's think about it. According to some studies of cardiology patients which I have not directly read, but which I have heard about, in the end, 90% of heart patients who are told by their doctors to change their behavior ultimately don't. How many of us have lost weight, only to gain it again? How many of us have tried to quit smoking or drinking or gambling or gossiping or fill-in-the-undesirable-behavior-here and have had sessions of backsliding? And yet, we all know of people – we may BE some of the people – who have begun to exercise more, to modify our diets, to maintain a lower weight, to stop smoking, to have stopped drinking, gambling, gossiping or whatever. Change is possible – and change is not easy. If it was, we would all be thin, non-smoking, heart-healthy, with lots of money in the bank, and so on. Change is possible – and change is not easy.

So, here it is: thus says the Lord, and that fear of change. This is what Paul says to the Romans, in chapter 7, starting at the 15th verse: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate... For I do not the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Through the love of God, when we remember **THUS SAYS THE LORD**, even if we doubt that **WE** can change, we know that we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us. Our hungry hearts need a home – that **IS** where our hearts are – so may we have the courage and the sense to listen to the Lord. Yes, we doubt in our ability – and we are wise to doubt our own strength. But if God is for us, who can be against us? May we act on the word of the Lord, to feed the hungry hearts of our church, our community, our state and our country and the world, because **THUS SAYS THE LORD**. May we listen to those words of wisdom, and act on them, until the Lord returns in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Jeremiah 31: 2-7

Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued My faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God." For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, Your people, the remnant of Israel."

Matthew 28: 16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."