

Homily by the Rev. Jan O'Neil at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Creve Coeur, MO on June 21/22, 2014; Proper 7; Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah: 20:7-13; Psalm 69: 8-20; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39.

In my days as a high school counselor I had a cartoon on my bulletin board entitled “Annual Meeting of Children of Normal Parents” showing an almost empty auditorium with one person on this side and one over there. Needless to say the kids loved it. Normal families? Normal kids? What is normal? Normal certainly includes conflict. It wasn't unusual for me as a counselor to spend time with, let's say, senior Chris' parents crying about their “good kid” who suddenly was breaking all the house rules; sowing wild oats, stirring up you know what.... I taught parents about the unconscious tendency for kids to create conflict as they are leaving for college or the next adventure....turmoil makes it easier to fly the coop.... to risk leaving the comforts of home. This can be a time of mother against daughter and father against son. In fact in my own home, part of me was ready to tell my daughters, “I can't wait for you to go.” This turmoil was painful and, of course, masked my fear of the empty nest. Yet separation is such an important part of the growing-up process: our children become who they are gifted to be, not carbon copies of us, and shake loose some of those “shoulds.” Some family conflict is a healthy part of the maturation process. Not unlike the terrible twos.

Most of us know how tricky families can be. We learn about relationships in families and some work and some fail. Conflict is inherent in the process, but how much conflict? What about Matthew's gospel: sons and daughters against their parents.... In a time and culture where family was the cornerstone of life, major ruptures were happening about how to be faithful in a Jewish family. Is Jesus saying that following him trumps family ties, don't look back, just follow me no matter who you leave in the dust? What do you think of this Jesus who champions a sword while denying peace?

Chew on that for a while. We'll come back to Jesus in the context of the other readings...for strong, provocative language follows us throughout all scriptures today. In the first lesson, prophet Jeremiah shouts “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” A prominent biblical scholar* suggests that in today's language Jeremiah was slamming God: you have raped me and you have prevailed.

Whether the word is enticed, overpowered or raped, this passage is considered by many to be the most blasphemous in the Bible. Jeremiah is exploding with fear and frustration, saying to God, I'm following your call, I am shouting your warning that violence is coming and I can't keep my mouth shut even though I'm worn out and everyone is mocking me. How dare the prophet called by God talk to God this way?? But wait; there is more to this story: by the end of our reading Jeremiah says, "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For (the Lord) has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers." Jeremiah shifts to praise. What is happening here? It sounds crazy to go from shouting insults to singing praises. I suggest that Jeremiah is in genuine relationship with God. God gets 100% of Jeremiah, not just the willing servant with smiling face and soft words. Being a prophet is tough. Might this be what God wants from us—a genuine trust that God loves all parts of us—yours and mine—especially the human part that blasts God in suffering. God can handle our anger! God is big enough! God and Jeremiah know and love and trust each other. Remember Jesus on the cross, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" When we are grieving can we trust God that much? Share our deepest wounds?

Just in case we are too hard headed to get this in Jeremiah, we hear the same song in Psalm 69, a typical lament. An innocent sufferer (could it be you or me?) cries out: God, I am devoted to you, but my life is falling a part. It is for your sake that I feel shame and cover my face. I have become a stranger to my family, an alien to my mother's children. Then in anguish the sufferer cries to God without fear—and emptied, reveals the rest in complete trust of God steadfast love, "Draw near to me, redeemer, set me free because of my enemies." It's like wrestling with God and exhausted, curling up in the arms of God. finally falling asleep. Our God wants all of you, not just the proper half, not the churchy part that puts on a good front. God longs to comfort us when life is too tough to bear. God is about intimate relationships with vulnerability to share joys and sorrows, successes and fears. God wants 100% of us--the whole enchilada--to love and cherish.

God knows intimately that sometimes life sucks to the point that we want to kick and scream—have a tantrum. But life is defined by daily crucifixions and resurrections. They are two sides of the coin. As our scriptures remind us: life is marked by loss followed by new life. God is there as we are sinking into the mire and offering us the Spirit: dying with Christ, buried, and raised

with new life. That is Baptism language. . We may know the words in our beautiful rite, but you may get a fuller image if you imagine me being baptized in a river, going under like drowning—and just before I can't go without breath any longer I break forth gasping for air—breath—spirit—and I am given new life--the 100% whole of life.

Returning now to the Gospel, are you still shocked by a Jesus who wields the sword and cries out in frustration that daughter will be set against mother and man against father? First, what if we are getting glimpses of the fully human Jesus, the 100% Jesus (not half), with a full range of anger and frustration—the same that we have—like the Jesus that turned over the tables in the synagogue, the one who wants to remind his followers (us) that being a disciple—a true learner—one that learns to minister to the outcasts, the stranger-- is not in for a stroll on the beach. In Matthew here we do not get a milk toast Jesus who leaves us too comfortable. No, we get the “full-guy” shouting: Do you think it's easy to be a disciple, a lover of outcasts, pushing on the authorities for justice...hell, no! It's tough work and there are costs—you might have to give up all things near and dear to you—money, possessions, even your loved ones who question your values. This is the earthly Jesus—not a pretend human: Jesus is not God with skin on in disguise. Can we have faith that Jesus is not talking about half-way discipleship. . We muster the strength to work for justice in neighborhoods that we didn't grow up in—but are home to many dreaming for God's love.

So in a sense Jesus is urging us on through the setbacks and delays with this tough talk. When the going gets tough, disciples get going. Do we need the sword to fight for justice, for social change? Jesus urging, persevering on the Way—shouting: stick with it despite some failures, losses. I worked on Dismantling Racism over 20 years ago in the diocese and Chester, our deacon candidate, continues to lead the march 20 years later. Governor Nixon just signed Friday the bill to allow past drug felons to qualify for food stamps. Christine McDonald author of *Cry Purple* and speaker at St. Timothy's has been lobbying for 7 years for this change. In Lui, South Sudan, continued internal strife results in incremental steps forward and back. Our Sigel School kids continue to struggle to progress in reading: we search for new strategies. Are we in for the long haul?

Kingdom work is more controversial than kindness. A church that glides through, never rubbing anything the wrong way, may even question if Jesus is Lord? If we are really called to change the world, to bring in the kingdom on earth...do we need Jesus' fighting words to keep us full of the spirit? We may feel like screaming and kicking: asking, "Can we really make a difference?" Hear Jesus rally the troops! "Yes, we can!" Then empty the waves of fear and make room for hope and the power of love. God is with us until the end of the age. Amen.

* Abraham Heschel, *Feasting on the Word*, Proper 7, p. 151.