

ON BEHALF OF HOLINESS

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Jeremiah 28:5-9 - False prophets counsel resistance to Babylon
Matthew 10:40-42 - Whoever welcomes me
Romans 6:12-23 - Slaves of righteousness

Today's readings are three wonderful stories from the scriptures. I want to set, as a sort of overriding question for this whole message, the question of the church's mission. And it is very pertinent for us as a congregation right now because the Council, in looking at the whole matter of visioning and trying to make that a more alive part of our congregation, has identified the rethinking and rewriting of our mission statement as one of our central goals in the coming time. And of course our financial stewardship is a challenge for us as a congregation, as is having people to fill all the positions and that sort of thing. And the common wisdom in the church is that the heart of stewardship is mission. We can assume from that, therefore, that as we come to a more living grasp of our sense of mission as a church all of our stewardship will come to life, too.

So how do we catch sight of the true mission of the church? That's not an easy thing. We can't just go and look in the Manual from 80 years ago to remind ourselves what the mission was. It is something that needs to be rethought in every age and in every time, and especially in our time because the church is changing and the world around us is changing. So that's one of the most exciting things you are going to be about as a congregation in the coming year.

Our scripture passages today start with words from Jeremiah, and they may be the most important hint for you about your mission. Jeremiah was a prophet, and prophecy is the centre of God's engagement with people. Many will argue that it is also the centre of what Christ is about. But Jeremiah's was a hard time in which to be a prophet because Babylon was threatening Israel, Judah. When there had been enemies in the past, the prophets had stood up and said "Gather up your armies, take a stand for your freedom, and God will be on your side." There were prophets standing up and saying that in Jeremiah's days, too. But Jeremiah said "No. They are false prophets; they are leading you astray; what you have to do now is capitulate to Babylon because if you fight them they will destroy you and you will cease to exist." That's exactly what happened to the northern kingdom. They are no longer a part of history. The southern kingdom capitulated to Babylon and therefore, even though there was a period of oppression, they did survive. Now Jeremiah's advice was deeply contrary to popular wisdom. What the people wanted to hear was "Let's get the army, and let's go and win." Jeremiah, being a minority voice, had an awful time, and he acknowledged that it would be only in the future looking back that people would know who was and who wasn't the true prophet. So this was a challenge for them, and it is a challenge for us today, to recognize the true voice of the prophet.

To give an example of what this means for us today, a couple of years ago I got involved in the casino campaign. At the beginning I felt that I had the broad support of the congregation, and we succeeded in getting some conversation going about gambling, gambling expansion in our city, and what that would mean. We made a fairly clear statement about the morality of gambling, and we succeeded in bringing the issue to a vote although we lost that vote. At another level, apart from the question of whether or not we have a casino in Camrose, what interested me was the number of people who didn't understand what it means for the church to be speaking in a prophetic voice. After the vote it was my turn to write the little thing in the newspaper column, so I reflected on the issue. I got an anonymous phone call--just a message that was left--although I don't know who the caller was. The message was quite derogatory, basically just saying "Look, you lost the vote so just shut up." What disturbed me was not the call itself, but that the call reflected what I had heard from many people both within and outside the church--namely, a real failure to understand the prophetic voice of the church.

That prophetic voice is what becomes really important when the majority is wrong. It's not the argument about whether the majority is right or wrong; it's that we are drifting as a culture into our modern liberalism which assumes there is no right or wrong apart from what the majority decides. We have really lost the heart of the gospel if we allow our culture to go where there is no right or wrong except what the majority says is right and wrong. We need to reclaim our prophetic voice, which means to reclaim our understanding that there is a right that transcends what is popular. Part of our mission as a church is to keep on saying the truth even when we've lost the vote. And so to be in the world on behalf of holiness is not about following the majority; it's about a truth that transcends popularity. Okay that is Jeremiah's story.

Now we move to the gospel from Matthew. At a certain point in his ministry Jesus gathered disciples and said "Now I am going to send you out. You heard me preach; now I'm going to send you out to preach. You go and talk to people. Some people will hear what you're saying and will get it, and some won't. But what I want you to understand is that when they reject you, they're not really rejecting you. They're rejecting me, because you're there on my behalf; you are my representative. And so when they reject you they are rejecting me, and when they accept you they are accepting me. And as a matter of fact it's not even me, because I'm here as a representative of God. When they reject me, therefore, they're not really rejecting me; they're rejecting God."

We have, therefore, this sense of Christ playing a representative role in relation to God. Christ also plays a role representing us before God. So we have this very powerful image of Christ as the representative in both ways. But how are people going to know? How were they to know, when those disciples came, whether or not they were genuine representatives of Christ as a representative of God? It's not like today when we have the canvassers coming to the door wearing the little I.D. badges. The disciples didn't have I.D. badges, not that it would have done much good anyway. We tend to orient ourselves very heavily toward identification badges or credentials, or other forms of entitlement, as if some people but not others can be trusted and believed just because of their credentials. That's the dilemma. There are no I.D. badges; there are no credentials for us to wear in our world. People who are representatives of Christ, whose voice is really the word of God in our world today, don't have stamps of approval on their foreheads to give us the

assurance that we can trust them. We have to listen deeply from our hearts in order to recognize where God is speaking, or where someone or something is speaking on behalf of God. We must listen deeply from our hearts to recognize that prophetic dynamic of the one who is the mouthpiece of God, the representative who is there on behalf of holiness.

When I think of credentials I have but to think of myself. Here I am. What am I? I'm a minister, an ordained minister. I'm here standing before you, and you are believing everything I say just because I'm ordained. Right? When you selected me you just looked at the list of ordained ministers and randomly chose someone from that list. Right? You decided that, because I'm ordained, I'm okay. Right? No, of course not, of course not. It's a much deeper process of meeting, of talking, of hearing one another's hearts and one another's sense of ministry, and of listening to the spirit who guides a minister and a congregation to come together into this pastoral relationship for a certain amount of time. And it's that same kind of listening to the spirit to know when it is time to move on, and to change. It's a relationship. I think it's good that the United Church calls it the "pastoral relationship," because apart from all the credentials and all the standards of performance and all those things, the heart of ministry is still the pastoral relationship which is a recognition that comes from the heart rather than from credentials.

So that's Matthew. I've got Jeremiah and Matthew, and the next one is the reading from Romans. Paul is always the harder part to understand. He uses the expression "slaves of righteousness"--it used to be "slaves of sin"--and we have to understand those two words very carefully. First of all, the word "slave." We get a sense of the term "galley slave," someone down there in the boat being beaten by a whip and that sort of thing. That's not the picture that Paul was using. In the Roman culture every household had a whole staff of slaves. Think of the slaves more like the servants in the British aristocratic household of the 19th century. The slaves were not free; they were owned by the householder. But they were honoured and respected and treated with a great deal of decency. The slaves in those Roman households were often in charge of the business matters, they were the household accountants, they often represented the household in public matters, they were well educated and often tutors of the children, and they were highly trusted and highly respected. In many cases when a householder died, his will included the necessary legal declaration that allowed his household slaves their freedom. The slaves were honoured, respected, people. So when Paul talks about a "slave" he is really talking about a respected representative of the household.

Now, what is "righteousness"? We get really lost on that one because we think it means following the rules. And as soon as we think that, we have lost our way because we have turned the gospel into a self-centred thing as if living the gospel is about following rules in order to keep our noses clean and to earn our just rewards. That's wrong. The word "righteousness" in Greek, and in the way Paul uses it, is about relationship. It operates entirely within the understanding of covenant--of us in covenant relationship with God and in covenant relationship with one another--and when that relationship is broken or violated then there needs to be reconciliation.

In marriage, for example, when one partner really wrongs the other and causes a breach in the relationship, the partner who has done the wrong is in a helpless place. He or she can't come back and say "Oh, I committed this wrong but, you know, it's okay;

we'll just forget about it and move on so we're okay again. Right?" One can't do that. There's an actual dependence on the other to forgive and say "Okay, I understand what you did, and I forgive you." Then the relationship is reconciled. And that's the kind of thinking within which the word "righteousness" operates in the New Testament where we are the ones who have violated the relationship and who depend on God's grace to rebuild, to reconcile, that relationship. That relational, gracious, picture of life is what "righteousness" means. To be slaves of righteousness is to live our lives in the world as the representatives of that relational, gracious, way of life.

It's like marriage, for example. We sometimes try to reduce marriage to rules that say "Here, follow these and your marriage will succeed." That shows up in a humorous way at wedding receptions such as one I attended last night. These days the couple often picks an emcee who interprets his job as basically to be stand-up comedian, telling all kinds of derisive jokes about the bride and groom, or giving goofy advice. Last night the emcee turned to the groom and said "All right, Jim, here's all you need to know to make your marriage work. Every time you get into an argument make sure you have the last word, and make sure your last words are 'yes, dear.'" It's funny precisely because it doesn't work that way; there are no rules. Marriage is a relationship between two human beings that is so deep, so rich, so beautiful. It's a living, organic, kind of thing that can never be reduced to a set of rules for making it work. And that's what our relationship with God is. Trying to reduce righteousness to a set of rules is as comical as the little joke at the reception, and just as tragic and foolish if we take that seriously.

To be in the world on behalf of holiness is to be in the world as representatives of this relational way of life. We lose our way, we become blind, if we try to follow that which is popular--if we try to win the vote--if we try to reduce righteousness to rules. We become blind and we lose our way, we lose our sense, we lose our perception of the church's mission, if we think we've got to hear the truth from someone with proper credentials and entitlement. But if we set all those aside, we then have a chance of truly understanding the mission of the church, of truly hearing God's spirit in all the different ways God's truth and leading is represented in the world. We then have a chance to know what it is we're really about, and to follow faithfully.

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