

Scripture & Sermon
Sunday, June 28 - ONA Sunday

Jeremiah 28:5-9 (NRSV)

5 Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord; **6** and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles. **7** But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. **8** The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. **9** As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.”

Matthew 10:40-42 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

40 “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. **41** Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; **42** and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Sermon “‘Realizing’ the Good News” Minister David Jones

I have been doing a lot of thinking about Jacksonville these past few weeks. I’ve been reluctant to share these thoughts from the pulpit because we’re not in Jacksonville. That I still have to process unfolding events, this present moment, through the lens of my experience in Jacksonville seems very revealing of the fact that I haven’t quite become authentically a neighbor to those who live here in Western Massachusetts. So, I’ve been hesitant. But I was comforted this week by a song called “The Revelator” by the folk-singer Gillian Welch, when she sings that, sometimes, “Time is the revelator.” I haven’t had time just yet to root my faith in these hills. But I know that will come.

In the meantime, sharing the experiences of another place with you, who do belong more deeply than I do to this place, feels useful. Because whether in Jacksonville or here in these hilltowns, we are guided just the same by the hope and faith in the kin-dom of God. Jesus tells us that this kin-dom is already among us, that God gives it to us

freely, but nonetheless we have some work to do, wherever we are, in coming to 'realize' it for ourselves.

I want to begin, though, with the problem that our reading from Jeremiah seems to pose to us this morning. His words in our reading today immediately follow the words of Hananiah, a rival for the people's trust in interpreting what God is saying in *their* time and place. Hananiah has just said to the people that, contrary to Jeremiah's dark portensions, the people have nothing to worry about, that peace lies just ahead. In our passage today, Jeremiah's words in response to Hananiah are laced with sarcasm. Where Jeremiah stands in the well-founded, well-tested prophetic tradition of raising his voice and insisting on being heard precisely because it is necessary that he be heard--that God be heard--Hananiah stands in the humiliated lineage of those false prophets who would assuage the powerful of any guilt or uncertainty even in the face of mounting trouble. Jeremiah, our true prophet as time has

revealed, stands with those prophets who have come before him and who will come after him, who have said the difficult thing, the awful thing, the thing no one wants to hear.

While we may readily accept Jeremiah's prophecy and reject Hananiah's today, this dilemma of discerning just who and what exactly represents the 'Word of God' continues to confound us, when we do not yet have time as our revelator, when the Word of God concerns what is happening right now and we can not measure that word against anything but our own faith. For Christians and many other people of good will, Jesus' life and ministry is a very helpful lens to look through when coming up against this ancient dilemma. Not because some of us see him as divine--quite the opposite: rather Jesus is helpful because, as Jon Sobrino writes, his "way of revealing the truth about God and human beings is through what is least esoteric and most common--his way is through love," a love so thoroughgoing, so limitless, that it is "valid even to the point of the cross." (*Jesus the Liberator*, p. 75)

Our reading from the gospel according to Matthew this morning also needs some context if we're to detect the precision with which Jesus presents this way of love. This passage follows directly on the difficult reading from last week, the one that alerts Jesus' followers to the enormous cost of discipleship. It is very difficult to be a Christian, very difficult to be a person of faith, very difficult to be in this world a person of genuine good will. And that difficulty will be encountered in our relationships. Yet, if we are prepared to see our task through--if we do in fact hold steadfast to the love of God and all that this love demands--our reward, as we read from Matthew today, will be no less than the presence of God, will be no less than the true life of intimacy with the God who is love. And Jesus is quite precise: our task, what love demands of us, what brings about our reward of true life and averts disaster, is simply giving "a cup of cold water to one of these little ones." And as he makes clear and demonstrates throughout the four Gospel accounts, 'the little ones' are the poor, the sick, the outcasts and

the sinners, the prisoners, the peasants and artisans, women and children--everyone who has been made to stand on the outside of the line drawn to exclude them from wealth, prestige, and power; everyone who feels the heavy burden of exploitation, who is oppressed and marginalized, who is tired and now despairs. It is in this sense that we say Jesus brings good news. He brings good news to the little ones, that their time of suffering will be ended, and a time of joy and delight in the kin-dom of God is at hand.

The kin-dom of God, fully realized, is surely good news for all, but getting all the way there is obviously a great struggle. And this is what I want to speak about today. I want to relate the good news that is bringing the struggle to Jacksonville. Because I was privileged to learn who the little ones of Jacksonville are, who God's favored are, who it is that Christians are called to serve, what prophecy we are meant to heed.

Summarizing this experience in Jacksonville is easy enough, but finding where to begin is another matter.

I could begin by describing the small, incredibly welcoming church that Caity and I belonged to, that had been planted just 15 years before we arrived as an explicitly open and affirming church in a part of the country still hostile to the causes of LGBTQ people. Or I could begin in the November of 2016, sitting beside Caity in the pews of that church, as the choir led the small congregation in a particularly emotional rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” This church and its minister had been involved for many years in the fight for a human rights ordinance in the city that would protect LGBTQ residents from discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. They had withstood years of vandalism to their church building, they had withstood countless hours of public hearings, hearing their own fellow Christians from other churches condemning them. That ordinance had not passed by November 2016--that victory was still ahead. So though they sang the

words, there were new doubts, new fears in that sanctuary that maybe Jacksonville would not overcome.

Or I could begin at any number of small protests I was tasked with attending as our church's outreach coordinator. One in particular comes to mind, a gathering of maybe 30 people (in a city of one million) one evening on the lawn in front of the city's massive, imperious courthouse, calling for accountability in the police killing of an unarmed black man, his mother crying out into the night for justice. Our small gathering was surrounded and vastly outnumbered by the police, whose presence was interpreted by the demonstrators as a calculated show of force in response to calls for a transparent investigation.

Or I could begin with the night that Caity and I skipped a demonstration--I think a vaguely anti-war protest that Caity and I didn't necessarily understand at that point in our lives. Instead we went to see Caity's sister Anna sing in St. Augustine. And after her performance, we sat down at a bar, and as young people do, we idly checked our phones,

and were suddenly inundated with videos and images of that protest, showing that it had been violently interrupted by a counter protester. Caity and I began to cry as we watched these videos of friends of ours being beaten and arrested by the Jacksonville police; and we saw at the same time, video footage of these same officers ignoring the counter protester who had incited the violence in the first place. A veteran for peace, a public school teacher, two UPS warehouse workers and union activists, and a student became known as the ‘Jacksonville 5’.

Eventually the charges were dropped against these peaceful protesters, but the trauma--and the record of the police lying about what had transpired that day--have lingered in the community.

At each of these demonstrations, and in our liturgy at this small church, the message was always the same. If we are to overcome, we must find a way to stand together. The same protesters who were brutalized demonstrating against war, the same black mother who was intimidated as she cried out for justice in front of the courthouse, were

the same people who stood by the LGBTQ Christians of our church when their own brothers and sisters in Christ had turned against them in the fight over the human rights ordinance. And it was these Christians of my church, one of the first open and affirming congregations in the South, that showed up and held signs when there was an outbreak of violence terrorizing black trans women in the city. And it was the same union organizers fighting in the warehouse for employee safety and better wages who worked with these community groups to pressure the company to fire a supervisor who was guilty of sexual harassment against their female coworkers.

I admired this coalition of the disinherited, their various causes and demands fused together into one movement. It moved me so much that I began to realize this coalition was not only inviting me to be an ally to their movement for justice, but that they were inviting me to actually take my place in the struggle itself. Seeing as I needed a job anyway, I decided that maybe I could go to work at UPS. Maybe I could see what

it was like to work in an unconditioned warehouse in Jacksonville in the summer heat for minimum wage while a supervisor younger than you is harassing you to work faster and faster, without any regard for your safety, before as you leave at the end of a grueling shift you're ordered to remove your steel-toed boots and walk through a metal detector, a final indignity for workers that management was not subjected to. Maybe our church would be served by that experience, and maybe--just maybe--the workplace would be served by our faith.

Ultimately it doesn't matter where *I* begin in relating these experiences. What matters is that wherever we break our covenant with God, wherever we forget that God alone is sovereign, that God alone can command us, that wherever we turn our backs on another and surrender them to a man's cruelty--that that is where *God's* anger and impatience begins. It matters that that is when God's interjection into history begins, that that is when God's solidarity with whoever is being crucified begins.

Jesus says the kin-dom of God is among us, that it is already present, given freely to all by God. Nevertheless, it is incumbent on us to *realize* it. And this word, ‘realize,’ it’s easy to overlook its meaning. But to realize something--whether an idea on the top of your mind or a hope deep in your heart--means to actually make it real, to build or achieve it in this world. It means to realize in our own lives, in our relationships and in our community, what has already been given by our faith. This June, that small group of protesters, that varied coalition--a small but vibrant constellation of hope--who once invited me to take my place in our shared struggle swelled to 10,000 in the streets. The black and white signs for black lives were surrounded by the blue and pink and rainbow-colored flags of the proud and endlessly inspiring LGBTQ community; protesters raucously chanted slogans learned from union organizers. And--if you looked closely enough--there were even a few crosses bearing the ancient hopes and love of Jesus Christ, in their rightful place among the coming kin-dom. I know that this is what Pride

month means in Jacksonville. And I know that this is what open and affirming Sunday means to us. 'Realizing' this Good News is what we are summoned to do.

Alleluia, and amen!