

“A Mournful Conversation”

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1

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The idea of prophetic proclamation is often looked upon as a believer standing up in public and condemning a person, people, and/or institution as evil, as sinful, and/or as doing that which God finds abhorrent. It is the notion that a prophet is one who judges and holds up to the public eye the wrong doing of the other. Now that may hold true for some prophets but for Jeremiah we need consider another image.

Jeremiah is called by some the “weeping prophet”. In at least three places in the book attributed to this 7th Century BCE prophet, Jeremiah is said to weep over the actions and/or the fate of the people of Jerusalem. Living among a people whose faith is used as a safety net and whose religious practices are of questionable value, Jeremiah is called by God from an early age to do ministry for 40 some years. During this time, he challenges the people, calls them to repentance, and predicts that their future will be bleak if they continue their fallen ways. AND he does so not with glee at being able to point out their shortcomings but with sorrow for he loves his people and mourns their failures. Jeremiah doesn’t just tell the people of their failures, doesn’t just provide them with judgment. He empathizes with them.

I hope as you read this passage you listened closely to it. This is a pericope in which the prophet mourns the cry of the people for they are being invaded and their city and temple about to be destroyed by the foe from the north. This invader is seen as acting at the behest of God whom the people of Jerusalem have upset through their acts of impiety and injustice. Being God’s spokesperson, one might have expected Jeremiah to “crow” a little and point out that this had only been brought on by the people’s own actions. Instead we are told that Jeremiah feels only grief and sorrow. He wishes his head were a spring of water that he might weep day and night.

Now one of the interesting parts of this pericope is that the word translated from the Hebrew as “my poor people” is often translated as “my daughter”. Jeremiah doesn’t just grieve as one would for a friend or a member of one’s country but as one who has lost a child. Jeremiah wasn’t simply mourning that the people were being punished but like a parent who has offered a child direction or advice and then seen that ignored, Jeremiah is struggling. His struggle is with the feelings of a parent who knows that children must grow and learn on their own but to see them fail or be hurt due to their actions. And the pain is greater when one has offered them the aforementioned advice and been ignored!! Now let’s move away from the parent-child thing before all the teens walk out.

I want to spend a couple of minutes thinking about the prophetic role which Jeremiah lives out. As is so apparent here, Jeremiah’s role as prophet isn’t one of simply judging the people or accusing them of failing to live out their faith. In many ways that is the simplest role of the prophet which while it may take courage and confidence in one’s own vision, it can only be described as the selfish part of the prophetic role.

Prophets are selfish in that they offer forth their vision what God calls people to do, live, act, be. The vision so often makes no attempt to take into consideration anyone else's vision or needs. It is a role in which one's ego could easily become inflated and overblown. One need only consider how often we see public figures show us their clay feet when they act in a manner which can only be described as foolish. And so often this occurs, I think, as a result of their own overblown ego which tells them they can do no wrong. And this leads me to my second point regarding Jeremiah.

Jeremiah isn't simply an egotist seeking to impose his understanding of God's call upon those around him. He doesn't simply rant about the failure of the people to respond to God's presence nor does he rejoice in the punishment which he foresees. Jeremiah mourns the upcoming invasion and enslavement of his people which he believes will be a result of their failures. He weeps over them. What Jeremiah feels is that emotion we identify as empathy. For Jeremiah, prophecy involves not simply judgment but also empathy, a willingness to consider how such prophecy affects others and, while never backing away from it, Jeremiah finds nothing to rejoice over as he puts it forth. His sorrow is such a strong symbol, I think, that God calls us to recognize and identify wrong doing by each of us but to find no joy in such acts nor in the punishment which they imbue.

And today, what I want us to take from this pericope is the call to be Jeremiah's, as we speak forth with courage and with faith what each of us believes to be God's call to us as a congregation. As we go forth to the small groups to discern that call, I want each of us to be selfish and to dare to speak what each of us believes God is calling this congregation to be. The questions to which you will be asked to respond are designed not to elicit what you think your neighbor, friend, even spouse, partner, children or parents think this congregation ought be doing. They are designed to elicit what each of you think this congregation ought be doing. AND what I invite each of you to be is selfish, an invitation you might never again hear from this or any other pulpit. Put forth your ideas, your beliefs as you listen to God's call to you.

BUT also be Jeremiah's and embody empathy. Empathy in this case means listening to and accepting the ideas of others. Please as you enter into the conversation, remind yourself that Jeremiah didn't simply offer judgment but also concern, empathy. And let me warn you, if this process works as it should, you will need to be empathetic for along the way we will not simply collect ideas but then winnow down that list and select ones which are reasonable, achievable, and affordable. Express your ideas, be selfish but remain empathetic. One of the difficult parts of being Presbyterian is truly living out our stated belief in the priesthood of ALL believers. Such means that we listen to one another.

Now let me also assure and invite all you to participate in this process. I know I've said it before but I want to emphasize again this is a conversation whose participants are not limited by anything but a willingness to participate. If this is your first time here or you've been coming here since the doors opened, we need your input. We will offer visitors their own small group if you wish to separate yourselves from members and would find that more comfortable but your ideas will not simply be welcomed but carry at least as much weight as members. The priesthood of which we speak has only faith as a requirement.

As we move ahead be warned though that the process is going to be messy and at times may be contentious. We are asking for your brains to storm with ideas and that you have the courage of faith to share those with us. However, because this is a conversation and not a monologue, it will require compromise and empathy. Good conversations are those in which participants teach and learn, put forth ideas for others to consider but then learn from the ideas of others. And as a conversation, this process will require both sides – learning and teaching, selfishness and empathy.

In considering this pericope, we need also be Jeremiah's in this society today. If we look around so often what seems to be missing is an understanding that communities, societies are built as the result of conversations. Such conversations celebrate and embrace the diversity of voices that sing in that community. It can't be choir of all sopranos or basses but has need of altos and baritones and even an occasional off key voice to make it worth listening to. In our society today, we seem to be forgetting such and find ourselves surrounded by the notion that what's important is simply to win, to have one's ideas carry the day. What's become important is to find the other's clay feet and shine the light of day upon them. Have we forgotten that the prophet was not simply one who pointed out wrong doing but also one who felt sorrow for the wrong doer? Empathy is needed in our communities that we might rebuild an economy and a society not on the backs of those who have lost the argument but rather participate in a conversation that all might enjoy the benefits and opportunities which this society can offer. It can't be a matter of having winners who take the spoils but needs to be a case of changes which truly seek to build communities of justice and hope for all. Our faith, which is in a God who is a God of the prophets and of Jesus, is a faith which calls us to do no less. And it isn't a simple or easy faith but one which enables us to dare to think new thoughts, live new ways regardless of anything.

Jeremiah brought to the people his vision of God's involvement in their lives and excoriated them for their failure to respond to that presence. He called down God's judgment upon them but then wept with that knowledge. His prophecy involved not simply such judgment but also empathy. As we move ahead, may we seek to embody God's presence as a presence which enables us to be both selfish and empathetic. AMEN.