

Jeremiah 1:4-10  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Luke 4:21-30

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The purpose of sermons should comfort the afflicted ... and afflict the comfortable. We hope these will inspire us and motivate us. Few of us like to feel angry or guilty. Gospel means good news ... although many prophets were stuck with the job of delivering bad news. Somehow, Law and Gospel go hand in hand.

This week's Gospel lesson is a continuation of last week's, where Jesus just preached His first sermon in His home congregation in Nazareth. He chose to read comforting passages from Isaiah 58 and 61 about good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus connected with people on many levels: economic, social, physical and political suffering. He surprised everyone in saying: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." With one sentence, Jesus had them in the palm of His hand. It's what people wanted to hear. When Jesus read "good news for the poor," they thought of the Romans taxing them to death. When Jesus read "release to the captives," they thought of feeling trapped under foreign rule for centuries by Babylonian, Greek, and Roman rule. Could all the long years of shame, frustration and humiliation end soon through Jesus' leadership? The crowd would have been happy if Jesus had finished there and gone to the potluck dinner after the service. They would say how proud they all felt toward what Jesus taught. But He continued. By the time Jesus finished, the congregation which wanted to pat His back now wanted to wring His neck and throw Him off a cliff!

What happened? What did Jesus do to arouse such fury? Jesus told two stories from the Old Testament which everyone likely had heard. The first story concerned the prophet Elijah in the Phoenician desert when he met a widow gathering sticks during a drought. She and her son faced starvation soon, but she wanted one last good meal together before they died. In the midst of her own anguish, she offered Elijah a drink of water.

Elijah had the nerve to ask her to share this meal with him, promising them how God would provide food and drink to sustain them through the famine. Everyone lived because she trusted this foreign prophet's promise. Why would this story make anyone angry?

In the next story, Elijah's successor, Elisha, heals an army officer, Naaman, of leprosy. A Hebrew servant girl encouraged Naaman to travel to see Elisha for healing. The prophet doesn't personally welcome Naaman, but sends a messenger to tell this foreigner to dunk in the Jordan River.

Naaman cops an attitude: Why not the rivers in Damascus? Naaman's people tell him he has nothing to lose by complying, so he does and is healed. Again, we might wonder why this story would make anyone angry.

When Jesus told His home synagogue how these words of Isaiah would be fulfilled in their hearing, they assumed they were the sole beneficiaries. When Jesus tells them God's grace extends to everyone, the congregation nearly explodes. Widows and soldiers of Israel were bypassed. Their entitled blessings were taken away to be shared with strangers and enemies! God loves people they didn't like ... outrageous! They felt confronted, not comforted.

Most of us don't deal well with criticism. We either get angry or quit listening to truths we don't want to hear. Prophets often received such reaction in their own home towns. Perhaps I'm not often prophetic in my ministry or preaching. Some of you rather enjoy a little hellfire and damnation on occasion in a sermon. "Hey, preacher, come on and sock it to them! Shock therapy is the only way to cure those hypocrites!" But what I've noticed is how such individuals delight in seeing the faults of other people skewered. They don't particularly like their own failings diagnosed, nor do they like feeling publicly humiliated.

I recall a critique a few years ago from a frustrated member who told me I wouldn't act on issue as she figured I should because I didn't want to make anyone angry at me. I listened patiently, and pointed out how I was doing a pretty good job of making her angry, and I still wasn't going to do it her way! Ah, well. While it may be my nature to be a people-pleaser, ultimately, I want to be a God-pleaser.

In the final analysis, I believe it is the desire of most Christians to please God. We have many opportunities as we come together in worship, in fellowship, and in the personal labors of our ministries. We may not always see things eye-to-eye, nor understand the opinions or priorities others have. But we strive to answer God's calling, believing Christ will lead and guide us. We pray the Holy Spirit will help us discover the right opportunities to develop our gifts in assuming new roles of witness.

All three Scripture lessons today bring pastoral assurance and prophetic challenge to God's people, confronting our hesitations and shortcomings, yet casting out our fears. Faith needs to mature our perspectives and abilities in due season. Jesus confidently announced His new role and new horizons. Jeremiah realized how he was in God's mind while in his mother's womb, born to speak the Word of God, yet needed to evolve in faith's calling. Paul's letter to the Corinthians declares we are all in process to become more like Christ, describing what God's love is really like when seen in our own actions and attitudes. Sometimes we are comforted; sometimes we are confronted. Law and Gospel guide and mature our faith and personal callings.

No matter what kind of conflict, misunderstanding, or intimidation we face; faith, hope and love will ultimately guide us through each crisis. We learn to mature in the ways we respond, putting childish ways behind us, acknowledging our imperfect knowledge and sinful

failings. Like Jesus, may we pass through the midst of chaos or criticism, continuing on our way together to serve faithfully in our Lord's Kingdom.

Amen.