

Rev. Amy Bertschausen from Care and Counseling

“Who Are You, Anyway?”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, February 3, 2019

Jeremiah 4:1-10

*If you return, O Israel,
says the Lord,
if you return to me,
if you remove your abominations from my presence,
and do not waver,
and if you swear, 'As the Lord lives!'
in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
then nations shall be blessed by him,
and by him they shall boast.
For thus says the Lord to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem:
Break up your fallow ground,
and do not sow among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
or else my wrath will go forth like fire,
and burn with no one to quench it,
because of the evil of your doings.*

On that day, says the Lord, courage shall fail the king and the officials; the priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded. Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God, how utterly you have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, "It shall be well with you", even while the sword is at the throat!'

Luke 4:21-30

Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." 'And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

On behalf of everyone at Care and Counseling, our board and our staff, all of our other donors, and especially those who walk through our doors, thank you for the support this congregation has been and continues to be for the work we do. For those seeking hope and wholeness, we're very grateful. I remember in my tweens and teens trying on different affectations, like special hand gestures or facial expressions, patterns of tone and speech. And that's exactly what I was supposed to be doing, learning who I was and who I wanted to be. My parents were either oblivious or very patient, or since I was the fifth kid, maybe they'd seen this before. Most of my friends were doing the same thing, especially the extroverts, which is

only one reason why being a teacher is never boring. Some of this happened, again, when I went to college. No one knew me there, and if I wanted, I could reinvent myself. Try to present myself as brainy or world-wise or a party animal. I had been a good enough student in high school, getting great grades in the classes I liked and barely respectable grades in the classes I didn't. I thought in college I would really apply myself in the rare air of academia. I'd be seen as one of the smartest and deepest first-year students any professor had ever met.

Turned out, by the end of college, I had good enough grades, strong grades in classes I really liked, but I did have to take statistics twice. It was enough with a good entrance exam score, though, to get me into the divinity school at the University of Chicago where I could start over and become a really great student who applied herself for once. And you guessed it, I had some really great grades, some less than stellar grades. And mostly because I did not apply myself. I didn't do the mundane work of all that reading and didn't yet understand who I was or wasn't as a scholar. You see, the problem was, I had always been told I was smart. That was one of the names I got called, always. Now, I'm smart enough, but, in truth, I think I'm more quick than smart. But being smart had, almost if not truly, become my primary identity. And it's taken me my whole life, and it will take me the rest of my life to fully understand that God loves me whether or not I am smart. And not only does God love me, but God has given me a deeper and richer, stronger and calmer and happier and grateful way to be in the world, which is being who God created me to be. And the trick is for me to be that self that God made. Jeremiah has opinions about himself, what he can and can't do. So when God calls him to be a prophet to his people, Jeremiah gives usual and probably required protest, "Oh no, not me. I'm just a boy. I don't know how to talk to people. But God's call to him is in this context, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you." God is telling Jeremiah and us something about our most basic selves. We are formed by, known by, and consecrated by God. Created, known, and deeply blessed at our core, our very personhood. Then we go to today's gospel's reading, part two of last week's gospel, the aftermath of Jesus reading the Isaiah passage about the acceptable year of the Lord with sight for the blind, freedom for the imprisoned, the poor will receive good news, and when the oppressed shall go free. And then he says, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And those folks in his hometown congregation feels so proud and pleased. Not only has their boy become famous, he just said these incredibly gracious things, that God's favor had been brought to them for their sake. Isaiah's proclamation is for them. You can almost see them grinning and elbowing each other, "Hey, isn't that Joseph's boy? Pretty cool, huh?" They have a kind of pride that their hometown boy had done well.

But Jesus, as he has always wanted to do, flips it upside down. Actually, he says, using Elijah as the example, "The proclamations for those you have oppressed, denied, or ignored." Can you imagine? It'd be like if you had a family member or a close friend who got famous was coming back to Saint Louis and you said, "Hey, can I have some people over and have you for dinner?" And that person said yes. And you're so excited and the evening's going to go great and you're going to bask in the celebrity of that person, your hometown friend. But in the course of dinner, your hometown friend starts calling people out for their faults. And worst of all, they're kind of right. Awkward, to say the least. But more than likely, there'll be an outburst of some kind and someone will storm out of your house. Jesus has basically told the congregation he grew up in that they really aren't all that faithful. In fact, they are part of the machine and society that leads to discrimination and oppression. The folks who were moments ago grinning and elbowing each other with pride are now so offended and threatened and then sensed that they decided they've got to kill Jesus. And as always, we can't hear Jesus's tone. How did he say that to them? Did he say it in a kind way or an in your face kind of way with gentleness or anger? Would it have made a difference? I'm not sure. I love you but you are an unconscious racist and a part of the system of oppression--try that at Thanksgiving. See how it goes [laughter]. So even if Jesus spoke the true in the gentlest of ways, it did not go well to say the least. We do know that Jesus spoke the truth and it enraged those who had known him all of His life. And they wanted to kill him. I'm not sure they knew Jesus as well as they thought. And it wasn't much before this section in Luke where there's the section of the temptation. And I always think of the temptation as a kind of refinement process for Jesus. And I knew it's not psychotherapy. But there's something about when Satan says, "Well, do this and I'll give you this. And if you're really so great, do this and then this should happen." And Jesus has to stay connected to who He is, what He's called to, and who He will be in this ministry of hope and healing. He gets refined. He gets clarity on who He is, much like people do in therapy. It is my deepest hope that at Care and Counseling, we help people come back to their truest self created, and blessed, and called by God. Theoretical psychologists as well as spiritual leaders like Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr, present a way to think about faithfulness in terms of our false self and our true self. When we are born, they say, "We are whole just as God formed and blessed us." But the reality of humanness gets mixed in, and most of us lose touch with this true self because our parents are not perfect. The world isn't always kind. We suffer illnesses including mental illness, sometimes trauma. We make decisions we regret terribly. We seek security and meaning in

illusory places. If we act in a certain way, we think maybe we'll be loved more perfectly by our family, our friends, those we admire. We develop a self separate from our true self and therefore at a slight if not great distance from God.

It can be a long road back to the person God created and blessed us to be. For a lot of us, this starts with the pain of a failure in our life, or depression, or rejection, or anxiety, maybe unhealthy relationships, a serious illness, or a loss that brings us to our knees, maybe discrimination, and oppression. And maybe if we're fortunate, there's finally enough unhappiness and enough belief in who God is calling us to be so that we seek the help we need to sort it all out. And we come home to the soul that God created, blessed, and called. And it isn't always easy that process. Sometimes, when we step back into our original soul skin, we upset other people who like us better the unhealthy way. I can't help but wonder if that's what happened in the congregation that day with Jesus. He was pretty clear about who he was and what he was called to do and be and it didn't go over well. Sometimes we forget this deep blessing of our true self and going back to trying on ways of being that seem more attractive to the world that gets us the things we think we want or need and it's hard. It can be very hard to trust God and the true self we are. Let me tell you, it can be real hard. This is where the utterly unique facet of counseling shines, helping people sort through the psychological. And if they want, sort through the spiritual of healing and becoming who they're called to be. Now you could say, "Amy, this sounds a lot like navel-gazing. And all we are worried about is our own individual selves." Well, there's a pretty powerful connection to how we live our individual lives and the fate of the world. When we are connected to who God has called us to be, when we are grounded, we can act out of our best true self needing less and offering more. Just imagine if you and everyone in your family was acting out of their best true God-intended self even some of the time. Imagine if the members of this church were acting out of their best true God-self some of the time, most of the time, I don't think we can make all the time.

I had the great honor for many years of being a hospice chaplain. And one of the things I saw repeatedly for some folks is that at the end of their life, when their false self had been stripped away, they had a hard time believing in their true self, their God-self, their blessed self. They had defined themselves by what they did, what they produced, how they made other people succeed or not succeed. So when they could no longer do for others in their family or do what gave them meaning, sometimes some of them felt like they were nothing. And the nurses would say, "Amy, I think you need to go visit mister and misses so and so." So I learned then that if I have a big issue in my life that I've been able to ignore many many years, and I'm pretty good at that, it's only going to wait until I'm frail and don't have the energy or the capacity to deal with it, and it will be right back. So I think I'll deal with these things as I go along.

So has this physician healed herself? It starts with the help of good soul friends, spiritual directors, and psychotherapists. But for me, it's a chronic condition--forgetting--this thing I do--wandering around away from my inherent blessing. So often I do it without being aware of it. I choose anxiety over trust. I work myself up and that usually dumps me into a deep funk. So like all chronic conditions, I must continually attend to it and embrace what it is. I have flare ups of false self-understanding and presentation to others. But now I understand what's happening. And most importantly, the knowledge of a wonderful treatment for it, which for me, now, is to sit silently in God's presence and be nothing more than the soul God created me to be. If you have felt separated from your true self, if you have suffered the fate of being human, hurting, succeeding, failing, sinning, I want you to know that God created and knows you so well, so deeply, that you that is at your core before the troubles, the traumas, the confusion, and the heartbreaks. This you that God has already blessed. This you that God calls forth to bring love to the nations or at least this little part of the world. This is who you are, God's beloved. Amen.