

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“The Burden of Proof”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 21, 2020

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

A Prayer of David.

*Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*

*Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.*

*You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.*

*Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*

*For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.*

*Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
listen to my cry of supplication.*

*In the day of my trouble I call on you,
for you will answer me.*

*There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.*

*All the nations you have made shall come
and bow down before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.*

*For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.*

*Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your serving-maid.*

*Show me a sign of your favour,
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,
because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.*

Jeremiah 20:7-13

*O LORD, you have enticed me,
and I was enticed;*

*you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.*

I have become a laughing-stock all day long;

*everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name',
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.
For I hear many whispering:
'Terror is all around!
Denounce him! Let us denounce him!'
All my close friends
are watching for me to stumble.
'Perhaps he can be enticed,
and we can prevail against him,
and take our revenge on him.'
But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior;
therefore my persecutors will stumble,
and they will not prevail.
They will be greatly shamed,
for they will not succeed.
Their eternal dishonour
will never be forgotten.
O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.*

*Sing to the LORD;
praise the LORD!
For he has delivered the life of the needy
from the hands of evildoers.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, Holy One, your word is before us this day, and I ask that you to guide me and together, that we consider what you would have us learn and do and be. In Christ name, we pray. Amen.

I just returned from some time in Michigan. The weather was cool and a bit windy, but it was sunny. And it's always lovely to be near the water and hear the waves. And while I was there, I heard a lot about what was going on in Michigan as the state was reopening after weeks of strict mandates regarding the pandemic. While I was watching television one night, I heard an interview with their mayor, Governor Whitmer. I was really impressed as I listened with her sense of call in the midst of this challenging time. Most people in the state approve her actions, and indeed, they'd had a 50% drop in cases in the last couple of weeks. But she's faced some very noisy opposition. One week, there were a number of armed individuals who came to protest and inundated the state capital building. At other times, so many threats were phoned in toward her and other legislators that they were all wearing bulletproof vests underneath their clothing. I was reminded, too, that she's also been dealing with historic flooding in the middle of the state and had to figure out how to house people who'd lost their homes in the midst of a pandemic. And so she was asked by the interviewer, "How are you dealing with all these challenges and negativity? Rate your days for me from 1 to 10 regarding your stress." And she just kind of looked at the interviewer. I was struck by the fact that she was very calm

and measured in her responses. And she made it very clear her rationale about decisions she had made. And I ended up with a feeling that whether or not one supports her actions, she does not take her authority and roll lightly. It took a lot of courage to carry on when things got really rough. And agree with her or not, what she decided to do make it clear to me she felt called to these things, that it was in her bones to say these things. But I also wondered if there were times that she indeed struggled and wondered if it was all worth it when she wanted to just throw up her hands and say, "I'm out of here."

I think that's where we find Jeremiah this morning, in the throws of challenging and difficult days wondering, "Is this worth it?" Now, Jeremiah was from a priestly family from a small town a few miles north of Jerusalem. He was only 18 years-old when he was called to be the prophet. And these were difficult, tumultuous times. His life witnessed the end of the Assyrian empire, the downfall of his nation, Judah, and the beginning of Babylonian rule and exile. His concern was that the leadership of his people, and therefore, his faith, lacked righteousness. They were not being just. Those with power did not use it faithfully or wisely. But he also realizes there is stick-necked people who were not to be deterred. And so, when they don't like his statement and angers them, they end up having him locked up in the stocks in the middle of town. And so, where we enter in today, he is lamenting all that has happened. He feels stuck and overwhelmed and lonely. He knows others are making fun of him and waiting for him to stumble. I've become a laughingstock all day long. "Everyone mocks me," he says, "For whenever I speak, I must cry out violence and destruction. For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long." But he stays true to his message. He tells them what he feels God is compelling him to say. And what he's saying is it will not bode well for us as a people. And it comes to pass as he thought.

Jerusalem has burned and the majority of its citizens are taken into exile in Babylon. I think there are similar echoes of lament in the morning Psalm reading. The writer says he has been rejected and cast aside because of his faith. He feels alienated and mocked, saying, "The insolent rise up against me and seek my life." The writer shares laments with God, imploring that God help and comfort him--get him out of the midst of this difficult time. We're never really let in on this Psalm with the issues that have caused this situation, but what we know is that he believes that his faithfulness comes at a cost. While the Psalmist is right in imploring God for support and comfort, Jeremiah's approach is a bit different. He is well aware of who has called him to this task and feels he has no choice. His faith compels him to do this. And who does he accuse? God. For God enticed him. He says it is all God's fault that he's in this mess. He rants, he rails, and he shakes his fist verbally. But in the end, we realize that there's power in knowing that God does not seem to be offended by their words of struggle and accusation because God also senses that they know God has called them to live lives of faithfulness. That God loves them and will be with them. They come to know and acknowledge that God never said being faithful means that life will be perfect or easy or prosperous, but that God's love will indeed prevail regardless.

Now, Jeremiah's challenge is great. He's calling out the leaders of his nation. And while our challenges may be difficult and different, they can also be challenging. In everyday lives, we too are presented with moments that compel us to speak, to do, or say things that others may not like us to say. And sometimes it will take courage. In recent weeks, many of us have read we have the experiences of people of color who have faced moments of shame or suspicion or condemnation, rarely with cause. One student shared his experience as a black student in a mostly white school. He said, "I made some great friends. They're still my friends." He clearly was very well thought of. He was captain of the football team and a student government co-president. He spent time with his friends in many different settings. But he said, "In this time of reflection, I want to share that there were moments that really hurt me. Moments that have been hard to forget. Times when some stranger would come up and say things about black people in disparaging ways and asked his friends if they were really hanging out with him." Now his friends did not run off. Indeed, in some moments they would surround him to protect him and all walk away. But that really wasn't enough. "It hurt me," he said. "Why didn't they say anything? Why didn't they just say to the guy 'You're wrong. You shouldn't say these things.'" He said, "It always left me feeling vulnerable and anxious when we were all out in public together. I think they knew that by their silence they were condoning something.

They had the power to make a difference, but in those moments did not." And haven't we all faced such moments? Moments when we knew we should have said something. Moments when we wished we had made a difference. So why do we keep silent? Why is it so hard? I think, in part, it is fear; fear of being mocked or rejected; fear of rocking the boat. And yet, then we are left with moments that haunt us and we wish we had done something.

I remember while growing up there was a family not far down the street with three children and every week their mother would come from the grocery store in her car down the hill and honk the horn as she moved towards the house. And if the three of them, ages 8 to 12 didn't show up ASAP to unload the car, there would be screaming and yelling. Often, we heard through the open windows sounds of someone being hit with a hairbrush followed by cries. Abuse was going on. With my deaf parents, I didn't know how to express it to them that. And I wondered if our neighbors had struggled as well. And it makes me sad because one could see over the years the impact it had had on her children.

What Jeremiah reminds us is that Faith and being faithful can be difficult taskmasters. For in spite of his laments and shaking of his fist at God, he acknowledges that being faithful is not always easy. And the same goes for us. It is not easy to confront, and yet there are times when we cannot ignore what has been said. Times when being faithful means speaking up and speaking out. I once read a statement someone put out that really spoke to me, that courage is hope in the face of fear. And these are not easy days. A lot of anxiety, worry, and fear are going around. We are in the midst of very different and uncertain times and the world has been turned upside down, and yet we know if we are honest, there are opportunities that will present themselves; opportunities to make a difference. Times when if we really listen to our hearts, we know we need to respond to what has been said or done, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

There was a meme that made the rounds a few years ago that went something like this, "If you were charged with the crime of being Christian, would you be found guilty?" Ouch. The actions of these writers remind us that there are times when we cannot remain silent. Our faith compels us to respond because we can't continue with the status quo. Jesus certainly understood that and lived it out and it was not easy. I think the message of the writers, is that when we speak the truth and we speak the truth with love, we do not go about it alone. Jeremiah and the Psalmist trust that in spite of all that they're facing, God loves them and is with them. Jeremiah said, "For the Lord is with me." The Psalm writers said, "Teach me your way Oh Lord, that I may walk in your truth."

Faith, they know, is a life-long process of learning and growing and walking in truth. And that if they trust God even in the midst of these difficult times, God will be with them and comfort them. So may their words be a challenge and comfort to us as we move forward in these days. And may the promise for us, just as for Jeremiah and the Psalm writer, the promise of God's presence and comfort and love fill our hearts with gratitude and our minds with wisdom and truth. So, what we witness to the call of Faith, we are those who serve and offer hope, challenge, and healing. Amen.