

“Stressed and Stretched”

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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-12:2 and Luke 12:49-56

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented--of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Luke 12:49-56

When I was first reading the lectionary passages for this week, I will admit I rolled my eyes. Both the readings this morning are as one scholar said, “Harsh, more than a little threatening and rather uncomfortable to hear.”¹ So I looked at the options in the Hebrew scriptures, and they didn’t paint a pretty picture either. So here we are, challenged by passages that are uncomfortable. Yet I think that is the power and the meaning of the living word. Passages that are challenging force us to move from focusing on the niceties of faith to the realities of life and faith. While the gift of knowing faith offers us hope and grace, life is filled with conflict. And so we are also challenged to stretch and to grow in our faith day by day, as well.

I think it's important to know what was going on in those days--the days in which these passages were written. So we will talk about two things that one doesn't talk about in polite company--politics and religion. The Gospel reading was written 40 years after the death of Jesus and they were awaiting the return of Christ. Those of the early church were facing great challenges and persecutions. The Jews who started to follow Jesus were no longer welcome in their home places of worship. Jewish leaders did not want to hear about Jesus and his interpretation of faith and the law. And so these early Christians became the Other--dividing even families that had been part of the Jewish establishment. Then there were the Gentiles who had been welcomed into the faith, offending those who had followed the religious laws and regulations for centuries. Why don't these things apply to them? they must have wondered.

So then we move on to politics. The Pharisees and Sadducees of that time had great political power and the Romans expected them to keep their people in line. With the talk of Jesus being King of the Jews, both the Jewish leaders and Roman leadership were offended. Jesus spoke out against injustices of the rulers of the time and about bringing in a new kingdom, and his followers carried that message on. And that led to persecution, suffering and death.

In Hebrews, we also heard about pain and suffering and persecution of those of the early church. They were challenged for being different and these words were offered to sustain them in their faith. We sit here in worship today because of the early saints who lived by the assurance of things hoped for and were willing to carry it on. Two hundred and fifty years later Constantine, the Emperor, converted to Christianity and for a time persecution eased. But then he began persecuting some of the Christians because they followed various aspects of theology that did not appeal to him. And so, over history times of division have come and gone, rising significantly during the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Reformation--and we know today Christians are attacked in parts of the world.

So how does this issue of persecution affect us today? We worship without fear of persecution, but still there is a lot that divides people. I think we're stressed and we hear a lot of news driven to make us fear. This election year in particular is filled with deep conflict. The church at large has moved through intense years of division about a variety of matters. Wars are occurring and many have become refugees. We struggle with how to care for refugees in need while balancing it with concerns of national security. And so I think we are challenged in many directions to find our way to faithful responses.

This morning's passages were written to help those suffering from persecution to keep the faith in the face of being ostracized and persecuted by those in power. And I asked myself what do these passages have to say to us today? What does it teach us about the persecuted, the rejected and those who are cast out? What if the challenge of the word for us today is not about how to find comfort in our faith when we feel persecuted, but to consider what it means for those who are different? What does it mean when we separate out those we call the Other--with a capital O?

Not long ago I saw a movie called "The Man Who Knew Infinity". It is the true story of a man and the relationship he had with a math professor from Trinity College, a young man with a brilliant mathematical mind. Now that seems pretty straightforward at first, but add that it takes place on the eve of World War I, that the man is a self-taught genius and an Eastern Indian, and it certainly deals with a lot of the dynamics of the Other.

The movie opens with the scene of a young man, Ramanujan, walking the streets of Madras. He is a newlywed, desperate to find work so that he might provide his wife with a home. Over the years he has written these mathematical formulas on the floors of the temple where he worshiped and filled pages of books. We get the sense that he is pushed by something beyond himself and that formulas seem to just flow

from his mind through his hands. But he has a very hard row to hoe, particularly in the colonial-dominated world where the British are in charge. There are times when, yes, he comes across as a little bit pompous, but he has such a sense of calling. He can't help himself. In essence he is driven.

Finally someone hires him to do accounting work. The one condition is that he help his boss learn more about mathematics at night. And the man soon realizes that Ramanujan has a lot to offer and that he'll need help to find his way in a world where degrees and pedigrees are what matter. So he approaches his own boss. At first the Englishman cannot believe that Ramanujan will amount to much. But over time he is convinced that this young man is brilliant--even for an Indian who is not formally educated. Finally he agrees to send a letter of introduction to Trinity College to a professor named Hardy. Soon Ramanujan is saying farewell to his mother who is both fearful and proud, and his wife who wants to join him as soon as possible. He sets off for England where he finds himself in the midst of a world so different, a world wrapped in the cloaks of tradition and class.

We learn about Professor Hardy who has sponsored him. He is pleasant enough but he is stuck in the ways of the academic world that he has been a part of for years--and he is eccentric. He is a committed atheist whose family is the world of academia and whose god is the god of mathematics. He is formulaic in both his work and his life and so dealing with Ramanujan is a challenge, because this young man is different. He is the Other. He greets people with hands clasped and a bow. He is a vegetarian, he worships God by another name, and displays artwork from home that is different.

And yet he is challenged by this young man who spouts forth formulas like poetry on paper. I am no mathematician, my family will tell you that, but I was able to gather that the two of them are coming at it from polar opposites. Hardy wants him to list the steps of proofs to show how he arrives at the formula. Ramanujan begins with formulas and doesn't really know how to explain how he got there. His work and his methodology enrage the other professors as well. They can't fathom how he could be right. They think he is trying to trick them or deceive them, and he is clearly not one of them--an upper class educated Brit--how could he possibly know the answers?

The effect of being far from home and those who love him take its toll and he becomes quite ill. It is in the midst of his recovery that things between the professor and Ramanujan begin to shift. Hardy realizes he has treated this young man poorly and done nothing to keep other faculty members from dismissing him all too easily.

One day as they argue over proofs and formulas, Hardy with a deep sense of frustration says, "How is it that you KNOW these things?" And Ramanujan says, "You won't believe me if I tell you." Hardy urges him on and finally he says, "It is God who tells me, who fills my mind with the answers and they flow through me. I cannot control it, it just happens."

Hardy is really taken aback. He is challenged to look at the assumptions of his own life anew. He is an atheist who has told his colleagues of their work in mathematics, "they are merely explorers of infinity and the pursuit of absolute perfection." He is challenged by the fact that there may be things in the world beyond his ability to explain or to fully understand. That some kernels of truth may not be proofed, but only lived. That one cannot write all the steps to living life and that "matters of the heart" are different. He realizes that Ramanujan, like those in Hebrews, has an inner vision that speaks to him from beyond the things that can be seen.

Hardy begins to realize he has a lot to learn from Ramanujan, just as much as Ramanujan does from him. He realizes that he has denied his worth, his intelligence, and most of all, his humanity and that the root of his prejudice and those around him is in having a world view that because of who he is and where he came from, he cannot be possibly as smart as they. He begins to work with Ramanujan and with his interactions with others on the faculty, and he challenges them to value Ramanujan and what he has brought to the table. Over time they do accept him and they vote him onto the faculty. If you have visited

Cambridge, you will see the tributes to Ramanujan enshrined in their halls, honored and valued for his contributions alongside the likes of Isaac Newton.

We are challenged, not like those of the early Church, but still challenged in how we approach divisions and persecution in life. In these days filled with divisive rhetoric, too often solutions are presented in an either/or fashion. We witness a tide of refugees who are flooding into so many nations, and all too often they are viewed as the Other. How do we balance the call of faith to respond to those in need with the concerns of many in a time of terrorism? The solutions are complicated, but they need to be addressed.

Not long ago a colleague from Texas shared her thoughts on the importance of adult education in the church. She said to me it is one of the last places for civil discourse in our culture. That really hit me deeply. It is a reminder that when we invite others from a different world view, there might be something we could learn. There might be something that challenges us. We may not even agree, but what we end up learning for ourselves is a better understanding of why we believe what we believe.

As people of faith how we respond matters. How we approach those who are different matters. How we treat others matters. Whether it is in conversations about an election or sharing customs or discussing faith, we are encouraged to listen and to live by the calls of mercy and grace. In listening and learning and in living, we can help create the kingdom Jesus preached about, a world where Paul reminded us we do not need to be uniform, but to be united in working for justice and peace. Amen

1 "A Stressful Sermon" by David Lose from [Dear Working Preacher](#) as found on [Textweek.com](#), August 12, 2013.