

Pentecost 4-June 25, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Matthew 10:24-39

"Do Not be Afraid" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The research isn't encouraging. The Barna group which does research about the church has discovered that over 40% of the pastors that were interviewed said that they have considered leaving the ministry at least two times within the past 12 months. Most of these pastors interviewed were not just interested in moving to a new call but leaving the ministry permanently. The number one reason cited for leaving was that pastors feel lonely and isolated from others. Then further reasons cited were that congregations felt either their pastors were too old, or they were too young. Some pastors no longer felt welcome in their calls because they were accused of either being too boring or being too entertaining. The Barna group simply states the problem in ministry today. They don't offer much for solutions.

From the readings for today, we learn that the challenges in ministry are nothing new. Jeremiah is lashing out against the Lord who called him into ministry. The bible version that you heard from today says, "O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed." Other versions are closer to the point by saying, "O Lord, you have deceived me, or you have tricked me." Jeremiah is crying out to the Lord and telling him that no one is listening to him. Not only are they not listening, but they are also ridiculing him and even his close friends are just waiting for him to stumble. But what seems to really tick Jeremiah off was that when he tried to quit speaking the word of the Lord, there was a burning that took place in his heart, and he couldn't stop preaching even if he wanted to. Jeremiah is lamenting his case to the Lord that he was not led into ministry, he was overpowered by the Lord to preach even though it seemed like his preaching was in vain.

Up to this point in the 10th chapter of Matthew, the disciples were pretty much on board with their new calling. The disciples who were fishermen could now fish for relaxation when they had time rather than trying to make a living by fishing. Most of the disciples weren't wealthy to begin with, so making a career change where they would be sent out without anything and would rely on the generosity of the people to meet their daily needs was acceptable to them. These disciples had seen Jesus do some amazing things and draw large crowds and now Jesus had given them the same authority to do everything that he was doing which may have been an exciting change to the ho-hum lives they had been living. Becoming followers of Jesus and given the call to spread good news could hardly be anything but rewarding.

These disciples now heard from Jesus what Jesus knew was about to happen to him. Success for spreading the good news was about to be replaced by suffering in Christ's name. The messages that once drew crowds to hear were going to draw swords to threaten their lives. Three different times Jesus tells his disciples that were going to be sent out "so do not be afraid". These disciples who left their families to follow Jesus, now were told that because of the words that the disciples were going to say, their families would be broken apart.

The Barna group never uncovered the main reason that Jesus said that the disciples would suffer or that Jeremiah suffered. They didn't suffer because they worked with challenging congregations. They didn't suffer because Satan was against them. They suffered because they bore the name of Christ. They suffered by granting forgiveness to the undeserving.

St. Ansgar experienced the same kind of disappointment in his ministry too. His main ministry happened after the year 850. He became known as the apostle of the north. He was sent to evangelize some of our Scandinavian ancestors. He was sent out, just like Jeremiah and the disciples, but he too had good reason to complain to the Lord. Most saints become saints because they have accomplished something amazing in their ministry. St. Ansgar's ministry experienced failure after failure. After he had converted groups of people to Christianity and had churches built in these areas, pagan religions moved back in and burned down the churches that had been built and the people returned to their evil ways. St. Ansgar was so passionate about his mission work that he even hoped that he would die as a martyr. St. Ansgar even failed in accomplishing this and died of natural causes. Even though St Ansgar's ministry seemed a failure and he never got to see the fruits of his work, several years after his death, remnants of his seed planting were remembered and grew into communities of faith.

Last Wednesday, I was called to preside over a funeral to help a ministry partner of mine who also had a thin connection to the family but was unavailable to do the funeral. I met with the deceased second wife, her aunt, and a daughter who didn't seem to be too excited to meet me. Before long, I had an idea for a message, and I was thankful that they seemed to want a funeral service to hear a promise from God and not just a visitation where people exchange their words of comfort. I delivered God's word to a larger crowd than I had anticipated and a few of the congregation made some eye contact as if they were listening to what I had to say. When the service was over, I waited in the entryway of the funeral home to greet people as they left the funeral home. I think the family appreciated what I said, but no one told me so. I felt like Jeremiah who had been deceived into thinking that this group of people would have been excited to hear the message that God had given me to pass on to them. Before everyone had left the funeral home, I decided I might as well leave so I went outside and almost made it to my pickup when someone called out to me, "Hey pastor, can I talk to you?" One person had heard something that sounded like good news that they hadn't heard before. I felt a little like Jeremiah who after all his lamenting, praised God for what he had done despite what appeared as a complete failure.

The reality that those who claim Jesus as their Lord will experience suffering in this life is not just for pastors and apostles. It is for all who follow Jesus. This reality is also for you, and you probably have already figured out that confessing Jesus as your Lord does not always bring prosperity to your life. So why do you keep proclaiming Jesus is your Lord even if it divides your family just as Jesus promised it would do?

You keep showing up and declaring Jesus because there is something that burns in your heart knowing that even though suffering will happen, you are of greater value than sparrows who even with inflation don't have much value. You still could probably get two sparrows for a penny. Your heavenly father knows when one of these sparrows falls to the ground and I certainly did my part dropping them and barn swallows off fences and power lines with my bb gun in my youth. Your heavenly father has even counted the hairs on your head and knows when they start falling too.

Yes, you and I have been given a message to tell others. A message that is not a popular message for many, but it is a life-giving message for all. And you and I have been called to proclaim this good news and despite the lack of the fruit it may seem to produce, we have nothing to fear, because we have been declared by Jesus to be of more value than the sparrows. Amen