

**Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost [5th Sunday after Trinity] (A), 22.vi.06
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:7-18; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
Holy Eucharist: ELW Spoken Order, 8:30 a.m.; 'Summer Worship' Order**

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

“O LORD, You have enticed me, and I was enticed; You have overpowered me, and You have prevailed. I have become like a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out . . . 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.”

--Jeremiah 20:7-13

I was listening to an archival interview with Peter O'Toole the other day, one I had heard and enjoyed before on the radio. He was talking about make one of the scenes in the David Lean film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, also one of my very favorite films. Peter O'Toole and Omar Sheriff were supposed to be in the cavalry charge on camel-back. The problem was that the camels the producer had provided were not very expensive

Arabian racing camels, but poor little Moroccan plowing camels, none of whom had ever had a saddle of any sort on its back. I don't have time to tell you what happened next, and I only mention this because, it seems that Lutheran Pastors are a little like camels. I am not at all sure you knew what sort of camel you were getting, nor am I certain you do yet. So, not only because the hour is growing late in our time together—the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, the 20th of July will be my last actual Sunday in the Pulpit and at this Altar, *n'sh'Allah*, God willing, as the Muslims and many Christians say—but also for future reference. Lutheran preaching camels in this country come in all sorts. There are indeed the racing camels when it comes to preaches—seven- to ten-minutes extemporaneous meditation and if you didn't catch the main point, too bad. Then there are the dancing camels among preachers, especially adapted to what is anachronistically called 'contemporary

worship’ in the carioca tradition. There are indeed the plowing camels among Pastors, who probably will chafe at any human burden. And then, there is the great caravan variety, basically robust, steady, plodding, careful and knowing exactly what to expect from all sorts of camel jockeys, even-tempered up to a point and determined to help everyone reach the final destination, or at least the next oasis. Within this type, there is what they call overseas the ‘Old Lutheran’ type of caravan camel. Here they are know somewhat disparagingly as the ‘Missourian,’ suspected of being cross-bred with a mule, if that were possible. That is the kind of camel you bet on in this race, that has lasted nearly six years, and here, as I probably should have explained at the outset—as I thought I *did* in a newsletter article or two—is how this sort of Lutheran preacher understands Lutheran preaching.

The Prophet Jeremiah, made by the living Holy Spirit of God into one of the greatest Semitic poets who ever formulated the passionate thoughts of faith into words, writes here as though to a lover, as though to the great love of his life for whom he has lost everything and for whom he would gladly give up everything again. It had not been pleasant things that Jeremiah has been compelled by faith to set before the people, their King and their Priests. He has spoken to them of their folly and of their faithlessness, of their readiness to forget God's love for the defenseless and of their heartlessness in standing on the side of the powerful of this world. He has reminded them that the living God Who redeemed them at great price out of slavery and Who made a great nation out of a nation of slaves will not be forgotten, that the living God will not be taken for granted, like some tribal totem placed upon a pole for all to see, or on a shelf in the house, or worn as a

talisman around the neck. Jeremiah has felt compelled and empowered to warn the people against remembering the LORD only in time of need, and then forgetting Him and His Commandments of justice and mercy when these are inconvenient to fulfill, or when they condemn the sinful heart that thinks it can sin in secret.

Jeremiah is hopelessly and completely in love with God Who lives and calls Israel and all humankind to the greatness and the freedom of life with and for Him, freed from the slavery of serving only ourselves, freed from the limits of our own selfish imaginations. Jeremiah loved the LORD as the LORD had loved Israel, and he could not keep silent. Speaking as he was commanded by the Holy Spirit, Jeremiah's life was a misery and a trail of tears and broken dreams, a witness to terrible, unspeakable things, but a call to return in repentance and praise

to the living God, to return to *hope* in the restoration of all things in Him.

The Church believes that it is one Holy Spirit that has proceeded and proceeds from God the Father, from eternity and the beginning of time to the present and on into eternity, one and the same Holy Spirit Who spoke through each of the Prophets of Israel, the same Holy Spirit Who was with God the Son at all times, by Whom He became in incarnate as Jesus the Christ, Son of Mary, Son of Israel and of all humankind. And the Church believes that the same Holy Spirit speaks to us through Christ and through the Apostolic witness of His Church.

Hence, the hard sayings of Our Lord in today's Gospel. He stands in the line of the great Prophets of Israel and the Voice that spoke through them is His very own. Christians ought to bear this in mind where preaching is concerned. As a

form of communication, preaching that stands in the Apostolic line of Christ and His Church has *three objectives*.

The first and most general objective of Christian preaching is to announce the Gospel, to explain that there is a living and gracious God Who is love and *to give glory to God*, to praise God in His Triune Name and nature, to point to the truth that God alone is the great creative power and authority in the universe and the hope of setting human history aright. This is the task of the *exposition* of Scripture. It is as much teaching as it is preaching. Christian preaching does not spin stories of God out of the thin air of wishful thinking. The living and true God is a God Who has spoken and acted in *history*, and particularly in the family history of a particular people, a people chosen by God for no other purpose than to glorify Him on the vast stage of history. The written form of that family history is the Bible. *Exposition* of the sacred text in its historical context

is essential, more essential than ever in a society in which most adults simply refuse to come to an adult Bible class on Sundays or any other day of the week.

The second objective of preaching that is Christian, in the Catholic and Churchly sense, is the *application* of Scripture based on the Lessons for a particular Sunday or festival in the Church year. Just as I do not pick and choose the turns and tides of world events, or the joys and tragedies that may affect your life and mine, so, too, the Lutheran preacher does not pick and choose a Scripture text for preaching based on a preconceived theme or series of themes, or upon personal preference for some parts of the Bible and personal dislike of others. The texts for a given Sunday or Festival all have the power *to warn and awaken us* where we have deluded ourselves into thinking that wrong is right, that sin is happiness, and that we are God. This is that ‘sword’ Our Lord talks about, not a

literal sword to kill people, but a sword that pierces the conscience. Saint Paul describes the preaching of the Gospel in these terms elsewhere in his Epistle to the Romans. You will find a Roman *gladius* or short sword superimposed on a book of the Scriptures commonly used as a symbol for the proclamation of the Gospel. Several of the pulpits from which I have preached have had the Bible and the sword motif emblazoned on them. The point is, pardon the pun, that, as the saying goes, ‘the truth hurts,’ at least the truth we don’t care to hear. It is one thing to hear Our Lord talk about all the low-life collaborators, prostitutes, homeless beggars, etc., who are entering the Kingdom of Heaven before those whose righteousness is just for show, but when, through the preaching of that same word in Scripture the Holy Spirit gets us to hold God’s expectations and God’s merciful love up to the face of our souls like a mirror, we often don’t like what we see. The

world we live in is crying out for compassion that leads people to will the good and to work for that. If my life is going along alright—so far, so good, in spite of a recession—and I find myself turning the TV channel or the newspaper page every time a report of man’s inhumanity to man comes in, perhaps its time to learn and to admit something about myself, and perhaps that time is now, *coram Deo*, as Lutheran theology says, ‘before God.’ As a great American theologian and Pastor not of the Lutheran but of the German Reformed Church has been often quoted as saying, “The purpose of Biblical preaching is to comfort the afflicted and *to afflict the comfortable*” (attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr).

In Christ’s Church Bishops send or Congregations call among them preachers, ordained to the Apostolic office of Word and Sacrament. These people, like myself, are outsiders to begin with, and, at the end of a day and at the end of a whole

ministry, we are still outsiders. No matter how much they are taken to heart, they *should* be outsiders, like Jeremiah, who are in love with God and who fall in love with the people of that community they call their congregation in that place they call their parish. And, *because* they love both God and the people of God, these outsiders will make some observations, not to judge but to warn.

There is a great deal of difference between those two verbs, ‘to judge’ and ‘to warn.’ God forgive me if I do *judge* someone, but if I do, I have come to a conclusion about that person and his or her character, to a *conclusion*, to the end of the line. If I *judge*, then I am done with the person I judge and that person is done for, as far as I am concerned. A preacher called by God and the Church does not judge, not even in hearing a person’s confession, but a preacher does *observe* in order to *warn*. I *warn* someone if I care about them. I *warn*

them so that they may avoid some danger or some blunder, or so that they may change a habit or a course of action. Now, my warning may mean little, but *God's* warning, what Lutheran theology and the Lutheran Church have called God's *Law*, *does* mean something if, when I hear the Word of God preached, I become like King David before the Prophet Nathan and say to myself, both to God in the depths of my being and to the community of forgiven sinners that is the Church, "*I am the man!*" This may happen to you now and again when listening to the sermon, and certainly without the preacher, this one or any other, having singled you out. If the called and ordained resident alien among you mentions a sin that is particularly prevalent in the Congregation, perhaps one reason why there is so much trouble or so little gets done in the Congregation, then rejoice and be glad instead of becoming irate and ready to organize a general strike. If it is apparent to him or her, at first

not knowing the lay of the land or what allowances to make for this or that gossip or bully, ‘because that’s the way they’ve always been,’ then it is probably a problem. Such problems as may come to mind in receiving the delivery of a Lutheran sermon are problematic not only for the smooth running of the congregation but, more and far more deeply to the point, they are problematic for the one who recognizes his or her soiled spiritual face in that sermon as the hearer stands and will stand before Almighty God without an excuse anywhere in sight. The *application of God’s Law* to our lives as they really are and to our world as it really is essential to getting us to listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say to us before it is too late!

But neither the *exposition* of the sacred story that God lives and loves as He did and does in Jesus the Crucified and Risen LORD, nor even the *application* of the Word of Scripture as *Law* where it reveals how far from the Kingdom of God we

are living comprise the whole purpose of preaching. Some may think it is. Some, both in some other traditions of Christianity and also here and there in our own Lutheran fold, may judge the success of preaching by the level of guilt and dread it instills, just as some may judge the genuineness of their own Christian faith and discipleship by that same standard. In none of the Four Gospels did Our Lord ever say to a person He had healed ‘Your sickness has made you well’ or ‘Your guilt has made you holy.’ But there is a strain of the faith-as-guilt school of Christianity that runs deep and wide in our American culture, molded in the crucible of Puritanism. I hope I have no strong tendencies in that direction, but I am an American and I was raised in that renewed wing of Puritanism that John Wesley let loose upon the earth. I think that, where I have probably done you and the Holy Spirit wrong in my preaching has been in the exposition of the text, something I love and something I shall

miss having to do on a weekly basis. I have preached for over twenty years on the Lectionary. I could preach for another twenty years and never get tired of the deep layers of meaning, of the new discoveries being made on the Bible's historical context, on what these stories meant to those who first acted in them and first heard them. It is hard for me to get off that topic, I know.

There would be nothing wrong with that, other than taking up so much of your important time, except for this: the preacher must *expound* the Sacred Text so that it can be *applied* to life, and the preacher must apply God's Word to life as God's Word of *Law* so that something may be *declared*. What is that? Is it that I am 'a poor miserable sinner' as Luther's rite for Confession has it? No, you and I can come to that conclusion ourselves without further comment from the pulpit. No, the Apostolic minister of Christ must declare that

which, if you or I were to say it to ourselves in our own name would be just so much wishful thinking and cheap grace. And that Word is *the* Word of God through Whom the universe was created and we are redeemed, God's own *declaration of hope!* Call it 'forgiveness,' call it 'Gospel,' that 'Evangelical' truth because of which Lutherans have always wanted to be called 'Evangelical,' call it whatever you want, because whatever you call it the hope God offers us and the whole world in Jesus Christ is greater.

I really have to laugh when I hear one of the presidential candidates maligned for supposedly not being a Christian, or because of some things his Pastor said by way of *application* way back when, because the whole thrust of that candidate's campaign right down to the campaign *slogan* could not possibly be more grounded in the particular dynamic of the Christian message, of *the* message for the sake of which all preaching is

done. You know what it is. Let me put it in closing back in its original Biblical and theological context. One has come Who speaks the Prophets' words and Who is the fulfillment of all prophecy, for He *is* the Word of God made flesh. His commandment is true and just; His love is perfect. Where does that leave you? Are you dead in your sins? Are you unable to change in a changing world? Do you have no neighbors; are you disconnected from those who need you in this world because of their race, or their language or because of their particular disease that makes you ill at ease with them? Do you live not caring? Are you afraid to live because you live in the fear of death as your family and friends die, one after the other, as your church dies out before your eyes? Is that what you say, to yourself, to others, or to God?

Don't you *say* that! Don't you *dare* say that! *He* has come so that you may have *life*! *He* has broken down the walls

between people, between you and anyone you thought you couldn't love. He has shown you how to love by giving Himself to you. And He has entered the gate of death, He has descended into Hell and He has made of death nothing to fear, *nothing* to fear, because He has been there and He will be there *with you*, and He will take you to Himself forever. He declares *hope* to you! He declares that the way to goodness and light is *open before you*. Can you believe Christ's declaration of hope? In God the Holy Spirit say, 'Yes, I can!' Can we believe in hope as this Congregation of Christ Jesus? Let us say this day and every day, and let us live as we say, 'Yes, we can!'

✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God

and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever.

✠ Amen.

