

The power and role of words

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

This week, we continue to build on the teachings from Paul from last week. Last week we were told that we were all equal in the body of Christ, and that each one of us was needed and as important as the other. That when one suffers, we all suffer. When one is honoured, we are all honoured. Today, we will hear a story of one person called by God who felt inferior. We will also hear about Paul giving more instructions on what it means truly love.

The prophet Jeremiah is someone that I most of us, I think, can connect with. Jeremiah resisted God's call because he did not think that he was up for the task. Jeremiah was afraid. Jeremiah was anxious, and tried to explain to God that, really, he didn't have the qualifications. He claimed, "I'm only a child. What could I possibly do?" He also believed that he didn't have enough experience to do what God was proposing that he do.

Karl Barth, who was a famous theologian, believed that the call from God "is an invitation to every single Christian to witness to the gospel by investing with radical grace whatever worldly roles God opens to us."¹ So Jeremiah tried to ignore and not respond to this invitation. But nothing he said, nothing he rationalized with, disqualified him from serving God's intentions. I have to tell you that I too fought with God and tried to ignore God's call, and God is very persistent. I believe that God is very persistent with every single one of you as well.

Jeremiah, in this moment, was promised by God that he would receive salvation and protection and we hear this in God's words when God says, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." So we need to trust that when God calls us to do something, that God will be there with us: protecting us, walking with us, encouraging us, and loving us. Now what Jeremiah was appointed to do doesn't sound like a lot of fun: Jeremiah was appointed to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow...and to build and to plant. It's no wonder he didn't feel up to this task.

And then there's Paul. Who was called by God to speak to the Corinthians about their behaviour, which was not good. This passage from Corinthians was never really intended as a

¹ James Calvin Davis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 292.

reading at weddings, though it has become very familiar and one of the most beloved scriptures about how we are to be in relationship with one another. Paul intended this for the people of Corinth who were treating each other poorly. They had lost the true meaning of what it meant to love one another as Jesus would have loved. To live in love as God would want us to. Paul begins with examples of why love is important. He points out that if I speak, but do not have love, then I am a noisy gong. If I have knowledge and understanding, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away everything I have but don't have love, I will gain nothing from that action. Whatever we do, we are called to do it out of love. Now you know as well as I do that the loudest voices in our heads are often the most negative and hurtful ones. They are the words that are not said in love. Words have power: the power to harm and the power to heal. As people of faith, God, Jeremiah, and Paul are reminding us all that we are called to use words that heal. Words of love.

Paul writes that love is patient and kind. Love rejoices in truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things; love never ends. So we're called by God to act and speak and live in love. Now I don't want to romanticize this love. When we love, we open ourselves up. We become vulnerable, and we can and we will be hurt, even when we love fully. There are times when the most loving thing we can do is to speak truth in love; to hold people to account. None of us are perfect. None of us can live up to these standards that Paul wrote all the time. But these words, these teachings, provide us with a guide and a standard to work towards.

Some of you who have been in the church building lately have noticed the Holy Manners poster, that has been posted at various high-traffic areas in the church. Like Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the Holy Manners are a reflection of how we want to live and work together as a faith community. They are posted to remind us of the importance of loving one another, and they provide us with language to hold each other to account for our conduct. We agree in Holy Manners that we will relate one another with respect, with humility, patience, open-mindedness, courage and compassion. And we promise to treat *ourselves* with kindness, which is often the hardest thing.

Have you ever noticed how much of a clanging cymbal you can be when you are mad at yourself? When you feel that you have let others down? Have you noticed what happens when you feel resentful or irritable? Can love bear all things, really? It can. It can because, with God, nothing is impossible. For where love is, God is present. What Jeremiah is being called to pull down and destroy are the noisy gongs of hatred, self-righteousness, selfish ambition, hunger, greed, and desire for power. We are all called to help break down past patterns that are destructive. We need to work together to overthrow institutions that clang like a gong; that are self-serving, that are not loving, patient, or kind. Institutions that lack integrity and honesty.

Like Jeremiah, some of us are called to speak the truth about racism and systemic injustice in our world. And we need to find a way to do this that speaks the truth in love – not hatred and not vitriol.

Paul concludes this passage by writing, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face-to-face. Now I know only in part, and then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.” When we learn to love ourselves as God loves us, to see ourselves as God sees us, we will no longer see in a mirror dimly. When God looks upon us, God does not look with judgement, calling you a sinner, a failure, weak or hopeless. God looks upon you and loves you. God’s love can bear all things: every mistake we’ve made. God’s love believes in the good in each and every one of us. God sees us at our core, and God’s love has eternal hope that one day, we too, will love as we have been loved. When we open ourselves up to seeing ourselves and the world as God does, we are fully known as we have been fully known. When we are fully known, we will see Christ in each other. We will see the love of Christ in the scars that people wear and have. The wounds that they have endured. And it’s God’s love, given and expressed through each one of us, that will heal and will transform this world. As we are known, as we learn to love as Jesus did, we begin to build a world of belonging, acceptance, grace, hope, and love. As we love one another, the seed of love is planted in another person’s heart. When we are kind, when we are patient, we help that seed of love grow and spread beauty throughout this world.

People of faith, we are encouraged and reminded to speak words that are kind and loving. Before speaking, a good rule of thumb to ask yourself this: “Is what I’m about to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?” As people of faith, we are called to speak for the disheartened and discouraged, but we need to do it by finding a way to speak the truth in love. It’s easy. It’s easy when we have love. When we have love, we speak and we think and act in love. I hope and pray that you will be bucket-fillers this week. That we will help one another live according to our Holy Manners, so that none of us are clanging cymbals. We are channels of peace and love. That is our call. May we answer it with our whole being. Amen.