

Sermon – Even Though
Sunday, September 11, 2016
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 4:11-12 and 22-28,
1 Timothy 1:12-17, and Luke 15:1-10
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Our first reading comes from the prophet Jeremiah. Hear these words from Jeremiah 4, verses 11-12 and 22-28:

11 At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse— 12 a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

22 "For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good." 23 I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. 24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. 25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. 26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. 27 For thus says the Lord: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. 28 Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.

Our second reading comes from the First Letter to Timothy, chapter 1, verses 12 through 17.

12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our Gospel reading gives us two parables Jesus tells when he is criticized for accepting and associating with the wrong people. Listen for the Word of God to you in these words from Luke 15, 1 through 10.

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous

persons who need no repentance. **8** "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? **9** When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' **10** Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The title of the sermon: Even Though

The text: *"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Luke 15:2

Fifteen years ago this morning, at 10 minutes to 8:00, a friend and I were driving to work together, listening to the WGN Radio Morning Show out of Chicago, when news director Tom Petersen interrupted with a breaking news story that an airplane of some sort apparently had collided with one of the towers of the World Trade Center. It was not yet clear what sort of accident must have occurred, or even what sort of plane this was—a single-engine private plane? A commercial jetliner? This was immediately before we arrived at the office, and the first thing I did upon sitting down at my desk was to pull up the CNN web site to see the story, which had scant details still at that point...and reloaded the web page minutes later to find a *second* plane had crashed into the *other* tower, which immediately dispelled any question of accident. By the time I tried to refresh the page again a few minutes later, it was essentially unloadable, buried under the demand of millions of people trying to see the same news simultaneously.

I suspect every one of you who is old enough to remember the events of that day remembers clearly exactly where you were and what you were doing when you first understood what was going on. This was a very strange and horrifying day, and the times that followed it were strange as well. It was hard to know how to understand this event, how to comprehend its magnitude and its unexpectedness, how to react to it, and what to do about it; and today, fifteen years later, confusion and uncertainty is still our primary national reaction to what occurred on September 11, 2001.

We have confusion because of fear, we have confusion because so many facts about the world situation in which we live are unknown and unknowable to us, we have confusion for political reasons, and we also have confusion for reasons of faith and religion.

For we watched our own people attacked that day for reasons of faith and religion, and we have yet to come entirely to terms with that fact. Religious war, in our own time, on our own soil? What does this mean? Surely it has implications for how we engage with people of other faiths, as well as how we live out our own.

Specifically, we might as well say, it has brought to the surface the question of what we, as Christians, ought to think of Islam and of Muslims, and I have watched an interesting phenomenon occur over the past 15 years as people have grappled with this question. Most Americans seem to have found their way into one of two basic outlooks in the wake of 9/11 and the continuing conflicts that have followed it.

A great many people have concluded, "Islam is fundamentally a religion of violence." This is not particularly shocking, since the simplest seeming explanation for the constant news of shootings and

bombings around the world carried out in the name of that faith is simply to believe the people doing those things when they claim to speak for Islam while committing violence. What more do we need, one might ask?

In fact, one of the titles often given to suicide bombers by their compatriots is “martyr,” which is an interesting choice, because the word “martyr”—by which I mean both the Greek-derived English word, and the equivalent Arabic word—originally means simply “witness”. The term was applied to early Christians who died for their faith because somebody’s willingness to accept death rather than renounce Jesus Christ was recognized to be an extremely powerful form of witness to the kind of hope they had personally found in the Gospel. Accepting your own end for some purpose cannot help but be a potent testimony. The suicide bomber, therefore, gladly dying in order to achieve blowing up innocent people, *also* is a powerful form of witness to something; the deed preaches powerfully about the nature of that person’s faith.

Many of us, hopefully most of us, find hostility toward Islam worrisome. But I don’t think we should find it surprising or unfathomable, when numerous members of a faith we don’t know very well are *intentionally* witnessing so persuasively to the violent nature of their faith, that a lot of people simply accept it at face value.

There is another way of looking at this, however. The other common alternative in present-day American culture is to view Islam as “fundamentally a religion of peace,” and to see its violent practitioners as outliers who are dangerous and often influential, but who are actually traitors to the true essence of the religion they claim to represent. President Bush went to some trouble to insist that “Islam is peace.” President Obama has done the same. This way of seeing it is more complex, but it, too, has its evidence to support it.

For a great many Muslim clerics are regularly denouncing violence, often enduring threats to do so. Pretty much every place Muslims live in the United States is completely free of terrorism or any other sort of significant religious violence. Those who represent aggression in Islam, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, may speak out against Christians and Jews, but the vast majority of their actual victims are other Muslims. If hundreds of thousands of Muslims are being targeted for failing to be sufficiently committed to violent forms of the faith, the inescapable conclusion is that a massive part of Islam prefers peaceful forms of it. It is not at all unreasonable to suggest that this group, being so numerous, is likely the real core of the faith, and that those who take up arms to promote their religion are a wild and fanatical offshoot of that core.

In which of these two positions, then—Islam as essentially violent, or Islam as essentially peaceful—shall we, as Christians, plant our flag?

Here is maybe a surprise: I think the answer is neither one, at least not as we usually see it done. There is something that makes me uncomfortable when I hear someone in the Christian faith authoritatively declare either “Islam is fundamentally a violent religion” or “Islam is fundamentally a peaceful religion.” I have to wonder, isn’t it a little arrogant and strange for us Christians to be telling the world and even instructing Muslims themselves as to what the essence of their own religion is? It strikes me as a little like me standing up here as a white guy and insistently explaining to you what the essence of the black experience in America is. It’s just not something I know. It is something I can

know something *about*. But it isn't a life I have lived, and so there is always a certain real and deep sense in which I am simply not an authority on the matter. Who am I to preach to actual Muslims, scholars, preachers, and the everyday faithful, about what the *true* core worldview of Islam really is?

It isn't that it is illegitimate for us to *speak about* other faiths, or even to have and express informed and strong opinions about the things to be found in them, any more than it is illegitimate for me to *talk about* blackness in the U.S.A. In fact, if we want to get anywhere as a society, it is vitally important for us to honestly talk about these things, and to be willing to voice—with appropriate humility and vulnerability—the conceptions of these things that are in our heads, as part of the cultural engagement through honest conversation that will ultimately help everyone and bring us all to a more full understanding of one another.

No, what is problematic is acting as if we, who aren't something, are the ones who know best what that something is. And it is practically foolish, as well. When you say, "Islam is peace," and then someone who believes the opposite can point to a dozen or a hundred actual Muslims who contradict you, your authority on the subject sort of loses credibility by comparison. And then when your case for treating Muslims compassionately rests upon an authoritative claim about them that you don't have the authority to make, then that, too, falls to pieces.

No, I think there is something else we have to do as Christians. I'll come back to that. Let's first go back to what we've heard in our scripture today. We read a very interesting mixture, maybe even a confusing one. Jeremiah announces God's fierce anger and judgment of the wrongdoing to be found everywhere. "A hot wind comes from me... the whole land shall be a desolation... the earth shall mourn."¹ Luke tells us of Christ *welcoming* sinners and teaching of the shepherd who, far from condemning or abandoning a wayward sheep, goes out on a personal trek to find it. "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices."² These passages sound dramatically incompatible, but for the 1 Timothy passage that bridges the two.

Speaking in the voice of Paul, this passage is full of strong language of sin and evildoing, and mercy at the same time. He does not shy away from the idea that his wrong was real and extremely offensive to God. He speaks of being "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence," and having been the "foremost" of sinners.³ And into this picture came Jesus, who "came into the world to save sinners," and through whom this sinner "received mercy."⁴ It is a good picture of the way judgment and mercy are woven unexpectedly and inextricably together in Christian salvation.

Our theology does not find its joy by waving away sin as not a real thing, or by saying God does not consider it to be a big deal. We don't *have* to minimize our sin, and we don't have to rely on a dubious and anxious insistence that God doesn't really care that much about it. We have the joy of knowing a mercy in which we can trust even when we are fully aware of our worst selves, and even though we are sure that God must be angered by what we have become.

¹ Jeremiah 4:11, 27, and 28 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² Luke 15:3-7 (*NRSV*).

³ 1 Timothy 1:13-16 (*NRSV*).

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:15-16 (*NRSV*).

And if that is the kind of God we believe in, it changes the whole angle we have to take toward people of other faiths. We so easily slide into thinking that we have to put them in one box or in another, but why do we need to do this at all? That whole exercise, by being an arrogant and impossible task as we've discussed, seems like a distraction, and worse, a temptation. Is "real" Islam the aggressive one, or the peaceful one? From our perspective as outsiders to it, this is unanswerable, and frankly, irrelevant.

What is God's position toward the peaceful? "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus, "for they will be called children of God."

What is God's position toward those whose religion is violent and opposed to Christ? We have an amazing example right in front of us in our second reading. Paul, when he was still called Saul, was exactly that. He persecuted Christians; he dragged them to jail; he watched over the stoning of Stephen.⁵ And yet he is met by Christ, who loves him as a dreadful sinner and blasphemer, who invites him into another way, and who grants him mercy.

If we are to love both our friends and our enemies, if we are to pray for both our friends and our enemies,⁶ then maybe we should think about whether it is really a part of the Christian life at all to be spending our energies insistently investigating and arguing about whether to designate someone friend or enemy, instead of spending those energies doing the loving and the praying.

For we might remember that we, too, are called to be witnesses. "Go and make disciples of all the nations," Jesus said.⁷ We will encounter the nations, all around us. Will we witness to them of love, or of hostility and suspicion? How will non-Christian people's encounters with those who carry the name of Jesus be defined? Will they meet people busy pre-labeling and pre-judging, affixing suspicion to them, or will those people encounter the same Christ who astonished and loved even those who were hostile toward him?

Here is a big secret that might help you in making it the latter experience, the one of meeting astonishing and compelling love: you don't have to think other people are right in what they believe in order to love them. It's a big myth that somehow has gotten widely believed that unreservedly loving your neighbors who stand for something different than you do requires thinking all beliefs are equally true or all life paths equally good.

So don't worry if you can't do that. It's another distraction. You don't have to think the differences are unimportant. You don't have to shy away from making and believing the bold claims of the Gospel, even where they conflict with other people's religious claims. Jesus certainly didn't.

I'm firmly convinced that it is more possible to have genuine depth of relationship where differences are openly and honestly acknowledged, even argued about for that matter, because this shows a true respect for one another instead of the false respect built on pretending to be the same. Not to mention the fact that not one of us is nearly as right about everything as we think we are, and so the

⁵ See, for instance, Acts 7:54-8:3.

⁶ See Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:27-38.

⁷ Matthew 28:19 (*NRSV*).

humility involved in welcoming someone in openly and learning and loving who they really are is something that will put us in a position to be corrected ourselves in many of the numerous ways we surely need it.

I'm talking about engaging, about letting other people speak for their own selves, or, as Luke put it with Jesus, "welcoming" people to "come near"; even though there is a barrier or a difference. Even if there is anger, or dislike. This is all a lot more work than choosing to put a label on a box that contains a whole other people. One label says, "You're fine," dismissively with a friendly but superficial wave of the hand. Another label says, "You're an enemy," and dismisses with the glare of hostility. But both dismissive, both easy, both wrong. True love and mercy, and joyful hope for other people is hard work. Openness means sometimes being hurt or treated badly. Humility means sometimes allowing ourselves to be ashamed. Welcoming means sometimes encountering people we just don't like very much.

But we are not doing it for nothing! My colleague, the Reverend Hannah Dreitcer, a few days ago happened to voice a rousing and encouraging summary of why we do all this; of the motivation underlying our work as Christians, as people who minister to one another and carry the Gospel to those without hope: Yes, it is always hard, she acknowledged. But "if we're going through all of the hard work, the pain, and the difficulties to *the glory of God*, and for people to *meet the love of Christ*, then it is worthwhile!"

May it be, indeed, to the glory of God, and may the love of Christ fill all our lives and all that we do. Amen.