

June 29, 2008

**Reading the Prophets Again: Inconvenient Truths
Jeremiah 28: 1-16**

If you want to be really popular with people, all you have to do is tell them what they want to hear. That is exactly what presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama will be doing in their campaign speeches from now until the election. Don't expect either of them to say much about the painful sacrifices and difficult lifestyle changes that we will all need to make in order to keep Social Security solvent for the next generation, or to provide quality health care for every American, or to significantly reduce our dependence on foreign oil, or to pay down the federal deficit, or reverse global warming.

In our self-indulgent culture, we don't really want people to tell us the truth. We want them to tell us the things we want to hear.

I love watching the "get out of debt" commercials on television. They feature stressed-out consumers who are agonizing over the mountain of debt they have accumulated. But instead of being chastised for living beyond their means and spending more than they can afford, they are portrayed as victims of harassment and intimidation. "Are you tired of being hassled by collection agencies? We can resolve those problems for you by professionally negotiating a reduced settlement of up to 80%. Pay just pennies on the dollar and let your financial problems become history." Isn't that comforting? It's kind of like praying the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts..." We don't have to worry about living beyond our means because there are kind and considerate people out there who will intercede on our behalf. We can have whatever we want even if we can't afford to pay for it!

Americans eat out an average of four times a week and fastfood restaurant chains have figured out that they can make a lot of money by giving us what we want. Add some thick, hickory smoked bacon and melted cheddar cheese to that half-pound all beef hamburger. "Have it your way...you deserve a break today...do what tastes right." What they don't tell you is that if you treat yourself to a Big Mac value meal with large fries or a Double Whopper with cheese, you will have consumed 63 grams of fat in a single sitting, when you are only supposed to have 65 grams of fat in an entire day! They don't tell you that the high levels of cholesterol will clog your arteries and increase the risk of heart attack or that the added salt will raise your blood pressure and increase your risk of stroke.

I've packed on nearly 10 extra pounds this past year. Going through the transition of leaving one pastorate and starting another, selling a house and buying a house, saying goodbye to one community and connecting with a new community is a very stressful experience and food is a wonderful source of comfort. But I've been able to avoid facing up to the reality that I no longer have a thirty-four inch waist by making the transition to wearing "relaxed fit" pants. Isn't that a nice way of putting it? I'm not getting fat, I'm just relaxing more. I can still wear 34 inch pants but now I don't have to be so up tight about it.

This year cell phone companies started offering unlimited calling plans. Now you can talk to anyone anywhere at anytime. You don't have to limit the number of minutes you talk on your cell phone or pay expensive overage charges when your bill comes due at the end of the month. You can be free of all that worry by signing up for unlimited calling. But - if you read the small print that flashes on the screen at the end of the television commercial - it tells you that unlimited calling plans start at \$99.99. That is \$100 you have to pay every month for the privilege of annoying everyone around you as you chat with your friends while standing in the

checkout line at the grocery store. Isn't it great that telephone conversations don't have to be kept private anymore? Not too long ago, people only spoke on the phone in the privacy of their own homes; or if they were in public, they went into a little booth and closed the door behind them. But now we are free to talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime.

In our self-indulgent culture, people who tell us what we want to hear are very popular. But here in Christ's church, we have people who have been sent by God to tell us the inconvenient truths that we don't want to hear. We call them "prophets," and they are an important part of our spiritual tradition.

Today in our text from the original testament, we heard the story of a confrontation that took place between Jeremiah and another prophet named Hananiah.

Both prophets lived in the holy city of Jerusalem during a very turbulent time. Their whole way of life was undergoing a tremendous transition. Longstanding political and military alliances had become unstable. The people of Judah were being threatened and attacked by enemies they never even knew existed just a few years earlier. They could no longer continue to live as an isolated enclave cut off from the rest of the world. They were being forced to deal with cultures and people who were very different from them.

In the face of these new threats, many of the people of Judah had forsaken their faith in God and placed their trust in other things. They forged new alliances and placed their trust in the might of their military. They traded the God of their ancestors for the Gods of other cultures. And as they felt their own sense of security threatened, they began hoarding their resources instead of sharing their wealth with the poor. Widows and orphans, the sick and the lame - those vulnerable people who had always been cared for by the community - were now neglected and left to fend for themselves.

In the midst of this stressful time of transition, Hananiah spoke words of comfort that everyone was eager to hear. He told his people not to worry. Two years from now, all the problems they are so concerned about will be gone, and everything will be restored back to the way they use to be. God would always be there to deliver them.

But Jeremiah spoke a very different message. He told the people of Judah that God was not pleased with the way they were living. Jeremiah called his people to repent and turn back to worshipping the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He warned them not to put their trust in the strength of their military, and scolded them for neglecting the needs of the poor. Instead of comforting them with soothing words that they were so eager to hear, Jeremiah warned his people that God was about to punish them for their unfaithfulness. He even took to wearing a wooden yoke around his neck as a way of symbolizing the judgment that awaited his people when God would give them over into the hands of their enemies.

When Hananiah took the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's neck and smashed it into tiny pieces - proclaiming that God was about to smash the yoke of Babylon - Jeremiah warned his people that the wooden yoke would be replaced with a yoke of iron.

Jeremiah was not a very popular person in his day because he said things that people didn't want to hear. He was beaten, imprisoned, and thrown into a cracked cistern and left there to die. But it was Jeremiah who spoke the true word of God. Judah was not restored after two years as Hananiah had promised. Instead, its cities were completely destroyed and its leading citizens carried off to live as exiles in Babylon for the next forty years.

Prophets are never popular. They are always treated with ridicule, contempt and disdain. They speak the truth that no one wants to hear and remind us that there are always consequences for our actions.

In our self-indulgent culture, we need to be attentive to the voice of the prophets, those who spoke of old, and those who speak today. They call us to repent and to return to the life that God wants us to live. They remind us not to place our trust in the strength of our military but to take up the work of reconciliation. They remind us that, even in these stressful times of economic challenge, we have an obligation to care for the poor and disadvantaged people living in our own communities because they too are precious in the sight of God.

Those who proclaim the gospel of prosperity today are no different than the Hananiahs of Jeremiah's day. People will always be attracted to those who tell them exactly what they want to hear. But here in Christ's church, we are called to stand with Jeremiah and proclaim the inconvenient truths that God wants everyone to hear. Amen.