**Third Sunday after Pentecost**

**June 21, 2020**

**Jeremiah 20: 7-13**

I want to tell you the story about a pastor I know from down South. Boy, what a first call he received. In fact, from the very beginning he was told that he was going to have an uphill battle with this church. You see, for years, the people had been misled by previous pastors who, to be perfectly blunt, were false pastors. These pastors posed as the real thing, as men of God, but they never taught the truth of God’s word. They preached the imaginations of their own minds and let the people pursue whatever course they wanted to follow. And that is exactly what the people did. To be honest, the decline in the morality of the people of this church was so bad that they had been described as *“not even knowing how to blush anymore.”* Can you imagine that? Sin and sinning became so normal and accepted within this church that they sinned boldly and brazenly without even as much as a hint of redness in their cheeks.

As far as their worship went, well. . . it had become completely corrupted. Instead of worshiping God the Father, they had begun to worship. . . now get this . . ., the *“Queen of Heaven.”* Devotion was given to her as opposed to the one true God. To say that this was a people who desperately needed to hear the word of God was an understatement. Here was a church that was literally committing spiritual suicide and do you know what? They were happy to be doing it.

This pastor’s job was to try and straighten them out, not for his sake, but for theirs. They were dying and didn’t even realize it. Yes, he would have to proclaim the Law. He would have to speak of God’s judgment, but he would also speak of God’s mercy and forgiveness. But, here is the kicker. Do you know what his supervisor told him before he went there? They won’t listen to you. Now, let me make sure you understand what was going on here. His call was to go to a church that really didn’t even resemble the church anymore. He was to go and to preach the word of God as truth to try to correct them and show them the way. And, from the very beginning he knew that his words woul fall on deaf ears. He was to go and to be faithful to his calling all the while knowing that he would be a failure. Now, would you want to sign up for this duty? Probably not.

Well, the prophet Jeremiah didn’t want to sign up for it either. That’s who I am talking about here. Jeremiah was the *“pastor”* and the first call he received was to preach to the people of Judah in the *“South”*. . . the Southern Kingdom of Israel who had without question turned away from the one true God. When God, Jeremiah’s supervisor, called him saying, *“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations,”* Jeremiah balked. *“Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”* He was probably in his middle teens when God called him and his life, as you read through the book of Jeremiah, was one of continual persecution and you know why? Jeremiah preached the Word of God in its truth and purity and for doing that, the people hated him.

In our reading for today, we see Jeremiah, understandably so, beyond frustrated with his whole situation. *“O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed.”* In other words, *“Lord, I didn’t want to come here. You forced me into it and now look at my life.”* What was Jeremiah’s life like? *“I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So, the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.”* For speaking the word of the Lord, Jeremiah received nothing but insult and reproach.

Welcome to life as a believer. Welcome to life as one our Lord’s disciples who has been called to speak God’s word in truth and purity because that is what all of us have been called to do; not just pastors. What we see happening with Jeremiah is exactly what we should expect to happen to us if we stand for the truth . . .persecution.

Jesus confirms this very same point in our Gospel lesson for today. *“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household?”* If Jesus, our teacher, our master, our Lord, was called the devil, does it not follow that we, his followers will be called the devil? If Jesus, our teacher, our master, our Savior, was crucified by those who did not like his message, does it not follow that we too will be crucified? Yes, it does follow and it does happen.

If you stand for the truth of God’s word, the world will persecute you. We see that happening routinely in the media. Christians are often portrayed as radical, far-right, Bible-thumbing, hate-filled, gun-toting extremist. I am going to ask you to stretch your memories a bit here but if you recall, shortly after the link was made between the Taliban and the 9/11 attacks, several major newspapers editorialized that America needed to be careful of conservative Christians because they are America’s “Taliban.” Don’t you just love being compared to terrorists? Shortly after all those articles, the President of our Synod at the time was on KMOX radio in St. Louis, he was asked if he believed that salvation came only through Jesus Christ. After answering “yes,”. The first caller to the program raked him over the coals saying that he was, *“as dangerous as Osama bin Laden*.”

Now, we expect this sort of attack from the world, but you know, that is not the scenario in which Jeremiah finds himself. You see, Jeremiah is not dealing with hostility from the world, he is dealing with hostility from the church. The people who hated him for preaching the truth were the church. He was preaching to a people who should have known better. The truth had been there for them all along and knowing the truth, they decided to reject it anyway. It’s when the church turns its back on God’s truth and persecutes those within it who speak the truth that is really most disturbing.

And to think that this does not go on today is to be naive. I have a friend whose first call was to be an associate pastor at a rather large and wealthy church. The senior pastor wanted only to be popular and so he never touched on any controversial issues and so this congregation which, save only a few, had quite literally all but forgotten God’s word. One Sunday, the appointed text was, coincidentally enough, Jeremiah’s call, which I stated earlier. *“Before you were born, I set you apart.”* Because the text lent itself so readily to the issue of abortion, that is on what he preached. After the service, a very angry chairman of the congregation pulled him aside and squeezing his arm told him, *“You are never to preach on abortion, or homosexuality, or anything like that again because the people here won’t agree with you.”* My friend said to him, *“By saying that, do you know what you are forcing me to do? You are forcing me to preach on it again the next time I’m in the pulpit.”* And that is exactly what he did. He didn’t even last a year at that congregation.

Now, what would you have done in that situation? How would you have reacted? Would you have spoken up and told this chairman that if he supports abortion he needs to repent because make no mistake about it, God is unequivocal on this issue? Or would you have kept silent? My fear is that many of us would keep silent simply to get along or out of fear that we will make someone angry? It is very legitimate for us to ask if the reason that most of us spend our lives as Christians without ever being persecuted is because we don’t speak God’s word of truth clearly. Indeed, I would say it is more than legitimate. . . I would say it is absolutely necessary.

I would be willing to bet that everyone of us here today, me included, has known someone within the church, not necessarily a member at St. Paul’s but maybe, who is involved in something that you know they shouldn’t be. I would go further to say that God’s word has burned in your heart, as Jeremiah puts it, telling you to speak up so that God’s truth would be known. Perhaps someone you know is leading their lives in a very non-Christian manner. Maybe they are leading a openly immoral life. God’s word inside of you was shouting to get out and you chose to ignore it or suppress it for the sake of not making waves or appearing judgmental. We have all done that, choosing to fear men, instead of God.

For that, and I need to be very honest here, we need to repent. For not speaking boldly his truth, we need to seek his mercy. For fearing men instead of God we must beg his forgiveness. Dear friends, Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 1:7 that, “*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power (2 Timothy 1:7)”* And that power comes to us through the Gospel of Christ. Think of what the Lord did to make us his mouthpieces. He went all the way to the cross, suffering persecution and torment so that by his Spirit, God’s word might live in each of us. Jesus has conquered the world. He has conquered our sin and by his power he will conquer our fears to speak his truth.

Jeremiah didn’t want to speak boldly. Jeremiah feared those who hated him, but, Jeremiah took hope in the Lord to rescue him. And that is what we do. We too look to the Lord to rescue us. Just as Jeremiah saw the Lord as his champion, so too is our Lord Jesus our champion who is with us always but especially when we stand for his truth. For it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of his death and resurrection, which empowers us to see that what is truly important is not what this world calls us, but what our Lord has called us to be. And what he has called us to be is his saints, holy and set apart to proclaim his word to a world which still needs to hear God’s message of judgment and forgiveness, law and Gospel.

As you live your life as a Christian, and boldly proclaim God’s word in your life and as opposition arises, and it will arise, as you speak God’s truth in love, and men scorn you, and they will scorn you, and as you proclaim Christ crucified and people hate you, and they will hate, seek strength in the one who proved his strength by bearing your sins and the sins of the world on the cross and seek comfort in the shadow of that cross. Then, empowered by his cross, turn right around and be bold once again. In Jesus’ name. Amen.