

11th Sunday After Pentecost

Education Sunday

August 25, 2019

Pastor Jacob Snowden

Luke 13:10-17
Jeremiah 1:1-10
Psalm 71

The Landscape of Learning



This is the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, chapter 1, verses 1 through 10:

*The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."
But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord."
Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

God, open our hearts, open our minds, put your words on our lips, that we may listen faithfully to you. Amen.

Jeremiah, like teachers and many of you had a tough job. Rembrandt's depiction of Jeremiah is stark and startling. The prophet sits, forlorn, amidst the dark, rubble-littered landscape of Jerusalem, after it had been overtaken by the Babylonians. Jeremiah, sometimes called the "weeping prophet" prophesied that the Babylonians, who had already conquered the ten northern Kingdoms of Israel, would soon be marching through the gates of Jerusalem. While other optimists prophesied that God would surely turn the tide for his chosen people, Jeremiah, not unlike a good teacher, was tasked with telling a hard truth. In the passage we have just read, we hear that from his childhood, he was called to one specific job. The son of a priest, especially

equipped by God, Jeremiah's job was to fearlessly communicate that though Jerusalem would be overwhelmed, a remnant would return. Jeremiah bought a garden in Anathoth as a sign of his hope, and despite some reticence, we could read in Jeremiah, chapter 20, that something like a burning fire in Jeremiah's bones allowed him to persist in his divinely appointed task.

Today, as we look across the landscape of American education, I am not sure we should be sitting in sackcloth and ashes. In the month that I have been in Severna Park, I have not stopped hearing about how wonderful the schools are in the area... whether talking about the Child Development Center downstairs, the Blue Ribbon schools that dot the area, or the Naval Academy. I know this is a place that prides itself on education. At the same time, I don't know anyone who claims today's learning landscape is all rolling, green hills and sunshine. Even the best schools deal with active shooter drills, overscheduled students, changing professional expectations, and a host of other challenges.

Today, as we seek to bless the people who concern themselves with the best education for our students, what might Jeremiah have to teach us? Parker Palmer was helpful to me as I prepared for today's service. He asks in his book The Courage to Teach, amid the myriad challenges that teachers face, "How can the teacher's selfhood become a legitimate topic in education and in public dialogues on educational reform? How can the inner landscape of one's own life train teachers to navigate the tricky terrain of modern education?"

I think as we look at the story of Jeremiah, we find a few points that are helpful, not just for teachers at the onset of a new school year, but for all of us. In the life of Jeremiah, I want us to consider identity, integrity, hope, and love—the inner landscape of a teacher, as tools for doing the best we can even in the worst of circumstances.

First, Jeremiah's calling, or sense of vocation, comes at the intersection of his identity and integrity. Identity, according to Parker Palmer, refers to "the nexus of all the forces that constitute a life converging in the mystery of the self." What a sentence! Jeremiah was brought up in Jerusalem, at the time when the Babylonians were bearing down on Jerusalem. As we come to his story, he was born in a place, a time, and family to do exactly what God intended, even in terrible circumstances. Even as the temple is soon to be destroyed, God still uses Jeremiah. Of course, there were other children of priests in Jeremiah's time. Identity intersects with integrity for Jeremiah to fulfill his prophetic purpose.

If you are familiar with Letters to a Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke keeps correspondence with a young man who wants to know if he is any good as a writer and if he might make a living of it. Rilke responds:

"You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you

may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple ‘I must,’ then build your life according to this necessity.”¹

Whether you are a teacher, a poet, or something else, this is how I think we are to make sense of the harsh outer landscapes in which we sometimes find ourselves. Jeremiah cannot keep the Temple from being destroyed. We are not always able to hold off failure. Yet we are in control of our inner-landscapes. If identity refers to the experience and potential we bring to a challenge, integrity is how we actualize that potential regardless of the circumstances. For Rilke’s pupil, that means understanding the necessity of writing. For Jeremiah, he feels the fire in his bones that he must speak. What is that burning desire that you feel? What are your inner hopes, your burning questions that you bring to your work? Surely there are depersonalized parts of every job, but every standardization and statistic calls for an equal and opposite personalization, that ignites wonder and curiosity like a fire in the bones. The flame of knowledge signifies that who you are and what you bring to your work are special and irreplaceable. There is no one else on this planet quite like you, and your students, clients, patients, or colleagues are the better for it. Identity and integrity form something powerful, a calling to work. In the words of Frederick Buechner, this is where your deep joy meets the world’s great hunger.

We learn about calling from Jeremiah. We also learn about hope. According to Jeremiah 32, as the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem, Jeremiah buys a garden. I imagine a scene like something out of “Game of Thrones.” The army is at the gate and people are yelling, “We need reinforcements at the wall!” Someone else pleads, “We need to get the children to the keep. Protect them!” And Jeremiah is pleading from behind prison walls, “Quick, I need a realtor and a notary. Hurry!” Jeremiah’s purchase is an investment in the future, despite the hard realities of his present moment. I hear bits and pieces of educational difficulties between public, private, and charter schools: standardized testing, STEM and fine arts programming, teacher compensation, racial isolation, and student poverty. For non-teachers, surely you can list the pressing concerns of your work this week, this month, or this quarter. What actions might be like Jeremiah’s that help you to invest beyond present challenges for generations to come?

Finally, I think Jeremiah’s story teaches us something about love. There is a story I like about Fred Rogers. I like most stories about him, but this one I find particularly helpful today. Fred was working on a degree in Child Development, and as a part of his work he was observing a pre-K center.

“There was a man who would come every week to sculpt in front of the class. The [day-care] director said, ‘I don’t want you to teach sculpting, I want you to do what you do and love it in front of the children.’ [Fred reported] during that year, clay was never used more imaginatively, before or after. A great gift of any adult to a child, it seems to me, is to love what you do in front of the child.”

I can’t pretend to know the tough terrain of your professional landscape, but as a person of faith, I am fully convinced that love is a part of covering it. *Every valley will be lifted up and every hill brought low; the uneven places will be made smooth, and the rugged land will become a plain.* (Isaiah 40:4) How will students learn resilience and coping skills? How can parents, teachers, or

¹ Rilke, Rainer Maria. Letters to a Young Poet (p. 2). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

administrators ensure students' college readiness or workplace readiness? How can students increase the circle of their knowledge while simultaneously increasing social time, recreational time, and rest time? Part of that answer is about learning what it means to love what they do.

The book of Jeremiah is replete with admonitions against those in Judah and Jerusalem. *I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage. I have given the beloved of my heart into the hands of her enemies*, reads Jeremiah 12. Yet we know ultimately, God does leave a remnant. What a lesson for us! Do I think every teacher or professional enjoys going to work every day with integrity, hope, and love? I've been to school! I work! Yet even in the hardest circumstances, Jeremiah can still do holy work. What a gift, to show those whom we teach that loving the really good moments keeps the harsh moments from being completely debilitating. Love for what we teach and whom we teach is what makes a difference.

I'll conclude with this, another line from Mr. Rogers. "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being." Because they loved their work in our presence, they have made a difference at some time in some way on the people we have become. Maybe some of those people for you are your teachers. Will you take just a few moments to remember those special people who have loved you and made a positive difference for you?

What a special feeling those people must have to know that you think of them that way. At the onset of a new school year, what a wonderful opportunity to make a similar difference for someone else.

Amen.