

Preaching Newsletter #8. June 2018, by Rev. Dr Eric Trozzo.

Topic: Knowing God.

Text: Jeremiah 22:13-17



Background and Synopsis:

Jeremiah is bringing a prophetic word from God, criticizing King Jehoiakim's reign. Jehoiakim reigned from 609-598 B.C.E. after the death of his father, King Josiah. Josiah had instituted a number of reforms such as repairing the temple and discovering a book of the law. He then seeks the guidance of the prophet Huldah in interpreting and implementing the law. (see 2 Kings 22-23). The new king, in contrast, discards the reforms. Rather, he undertakes building himself a lavish new palace, using expensive wood such as cedar and attention-grabbing paint colors such as vermilion.

Law in the Text:

Jeremiah confronts Jehoiakim with the facts of what he has been doing. He is building a great mansion to glorify himself and he is doing it without giving fair wages. By doing this he is oppressing the poor and needy. He is focused on building up his own reputation and luxury at the expense of others. In other words, Jehoiakim is not merely building an unnecessary monument to his own arrogance. That would certainly in itself be distasteful at best. The bigger problem is he is using unjust practices to build it. He is reaping the rewards of someone else's labor and then refusing to pay the laborer. Jehoiakim is underpaying or refusing to pay the workers that are building the palace for him. Thus, he is making himself richer while making the day laborers poorer. For these practices, Jeremiah confronts Jehoiakim and tells him that God condemns these practices that are devastating to the lives of

the poor people. As the king, he is at the top of society and he is using his position to take even more from those at the bottom.

Jeremiah puts the charges of the ways that Jehoiakim has sinned to the king by giving a direct account of what has been happening.

Jer. 22:13 says:

**“Woe to him who builds his house by
unrighteousness,
and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work for nothing,
and does not give them their wages;”**

To disregard the well-being of others, take what is rightfully theirs, and use it to build up oneself is to do violence to them, as it then says Jer. 22:17. Doing violence to another is not just a matter of physically assaulting them, in other words; when we drain the sense of purpose from their lives and grind them down with cruel indifference we do violence to them as well.

Gospel in the Text:

The gospel in this text is more implicit than explicit. The fact that God gives word to Jeremiah to confront the king indicates that God hears the cries and concerns of those who suffer. Though the unrighteous in this world continually act against those who are weaker than them, God does not abandon those struggling under the weight of this injustice. God hears their cries, and God cares about their suffering.

A persistent biblical message is that God speaks and acts on behalf of those put down by the people with power in this world. In this case, it is the workers who have been treated unfairly. The implied promise to them in this text is that God is with them. God speaks for them in situations where they are powerless to have a voice of their own. God is with them and God will not forget them. This is a powerful promise that God makes again and again in the Bible. In this text, God does not make this promise in words, but rather through actions. God sends Jeremiah to confront the king on behalf of those in need. This action demonstrates God's concern and solidarity with those whom the king has oppressed.

Transformation in the Text:

Jeremiah lifts up to Jehoiakim the example of his father, Josiah. Jeremiah contends,

**“Did not your father eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me?
says the Lord.” (Jer 22:15b-16, NRSV)**

In other words, to know God is to do justice. When we come to know God, we learn that God is one who does not forget those in need. When we know that this is who God is, how can we not be moved to seek justice? How can we not reach out to make life better for those in need, treating them fairly? If we have the power to make a difference, then we are called to use that power to improve the lives of the poor and needy. This is the example that Jeremiah wants Jehoiakim to see in Josiah, and that we can see in this text as well.

The transformation that comes in this text is that when we know that God’s nature is to remember those who are suffering and oppressed, then we will remember those people too. Quite often such people are invisible to us and forgotten by the world. But because we find in the bible that God remembers them, we are moved to remember them as well.

Theological Reflection:

To know God is to do justice. This is one of the works of the Holy Spirit in our lives, transforming us, I would argue. Part of the Good News of the biblical message is that God is one who will not forget the needy rather than one who will exalt the powerful. Coming to know this truth will change us. It causes us to not look to build monuments to our own arrogance, but rather to look to the needs of others. Knowing God to be the God of the weak leads us to action. Knowing God and acting justly are inseparable. In this passage we can see a movement from being condemned for our self-serving ways (being like Jehoiakim), to being confronted with the reality that God’s concern is for those that the world considers unimportant (the prophetic words of Jeremiah), to being moved to act for justice (like Josiah). We can understand this process of moving from having our sin named by the law (Jehoiakim), to being confronted with God’s faithfulness as gospel (through the words spoken through Jeremiah), to being led by the Holy Spirit to a new way of acting as transformation (Josiah). To be encountered by God is to be called to justice; to act for justice is a sign of knowing God. God and justice are inseparable.

Notice that when Jeremiah speaks of Josiah, he notes that Josiah ate and drank and sought justice and righteousness. We can see in this that God allows for enjoying things like eating and drinking; this is not a call to give up all pleasures in life. It is, however, an insistence that along with enjoying the blessings that we may have we must also seek justice for others. Yet I would add that such seeking justice is not a burden placed upon us. Rather, when we have a true experience of God we come to know that a concern for justice is central

to who God is. Because this is who God is, we gladly join in with God's passion for those who are suffering. Thus, when we come to know God, we are transformed into people with a passion for caring for the needs of other people. This does not preclude us from enjoying good things in life, but it does make us question the cost to other people that allows these good things to come to us.

If other people are not paid enough to live on so that we can buy goods at the market for the cheapest price possible, for instance, then the cost to human life is not worth it. Being turned towards justice through an encounter with the Holy Spirit means that we cannot accept luxuries that cause violence to be done to those who make it possible for us to have those luxuries. Our passion for the well-being of others, when led by the Holy Spirit, is greater than our desire for unnecessary indulgences. Again, this is not so much a demand as it is a result of knowing that God who is passionate about caring for those who are vulnerable.

What Theologians Say:

“Although the kingdom [of God] must not be confused with the establishment of a just society, this does not mean that it is indifferent to this society. ... More profoundly, the proclamation of the kingdom reveals to society itself the aspiration for a just society and leads it to discover unsuspected dimensions and unexplored paths. The kingdom is realized in a society of fellowship and justice; and, in turn, this realization shines forth in promise and in hope of complete communion of us all with God.”

Contemporary Latin American theologian Gustavo Guitierrez, “Jesus and the Political World,” *Essential Writings*, 211.