

Meditation 6/25/17
Rev. Alan Lindal
Jeremiah 20:7-13
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

After we had stoned Stephen for speaking truth to power in the morning sermon on Mother's Day of all days, one of the congregants said to me as he left, "Alan, why don't you say what's on your mind? Don't beat around the bush." The prophet Jeremiah, who will be making an appearance in the next several weeks in the lectionary, did not beat around the bush.

Let me give you an example of a prophecy he made immediately before today's reading. This takes place in the late sixth century B.C.. The northern nation of Israel has fallen to Assyria and now Babylon is threatening Judah and Jerusalem.

This begins with the fourteenth verse of the nineteenth chapter of Jeremiah. "Jeremiah came in from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy and stood in the court of the Lord's house. He said to all the people. These are the words of the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel. I am bringing on this city and on all its blood-spattered altars every disaster with which I have threatened it, for its people have remained obstinate and have refused to listen to me.

When Pashhur son of Immer the priest, the chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, he had him flogged and put him into the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin, in the house of the Lord. The next morning he released him, and Jeremiah said to him, The Lord has called you not Pashhur but Magor-missabib, that is Terror Let Loose. For these are the words of the Lord: I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends; they shall fall by the sword of the enemy before your very eyes. I will hand over all of Judah to the king of Babylon, and he will deport them to Babylon and put them to the sword. I will give all this city's store of wealth and riches and all the treasures of the kings of Judah to their enemies; they shall seize them as spoil and carry them off to Babylon. You, Pashhur, and all your household shall go into captivity and come to Babylon. There you shall die and there you shall be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have been a false prophet. And then, from today's reading. O Lord, you have duped me and I have been your dupe; you have outwitted me and have prevailed. I have been made a laughing stock all the day long, everyone mocks me. I can't help but proclaim violence and destruction all the time. Whenever I think I won't pay attention to God anymore, his word is in my very body, like my heart is on fire. But then he comes to his position of accounting. O Lord of Hosts, you do test the righteous and search the depths of the heart; to you have I committed my cause. Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord; for he rescues the poor from those who would do them harm."

Many of the psalms we sing resemble the reading from Jeremiah: we lament our situation before God, and then we praise God, even if our terrible situation remains. God is praised because God is God, not because we have been relieved of our troubles.

What gives birth to absolute trust in God? What makes firm an unswerving commitment to our Lord? We find the answer in the gospel text.

Lawyer Kenneth Feinberg chaired the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund, which gave money to the family of each person who died in the 2001 terror attacks. Starting with a formula and then using his discretion, Feinberg considered the victims' age, their dependents, whether they had life insurance-and their income and earning potential. The value assigned to these lost lives varied dramatically: as little as \$250,000 for blue-collar workers, as much as 7.1 million for executives.

Feinberg later reflected on his experience. "As I met with the 0/11 families and wrestled with issues surrounding the valuation of lives lost, I began to question this basic premise of our legal system," he told NPR. "Trained in the law, I had always accepted that no two lives were worth the same in financial terms. But now I found the law in conflict with my growing belief in the equality of

all life.”

In our gospel text today Jesus sends his disciples out into a perilous world. There will be divisions in their families. There will be those that “kill the body.” The disciples must be prepared to take up the cross.

And yet, in the middle of this recitation of conflict and danger, Jesus suddenly speaks of the smallest, most insignificant creatures. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” In the market place, sparrows were the meat of the poor, the ground chuck of the first century. Yet their lives-their deaths- are not beneath God's attention and care. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus says, “you are of more value than many sparrows.”

In 1905, these lines inspired Canadian schoolteacher Civilla Martin to write the words to this song. “Why do I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows come? Why does my heart grow weary and long for Heaven and home? When Jesus is my portion, my constant friend is he. For his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me. His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free. For his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.” This gospel hymn declares with assurance, “I know he watches me.” It's not hard to understand the hymn's later popularity in the African-American church. In a world that often insists that black lives do not matter, that the poor are to be tolerated at best and the forgotten to remain forgotten, Jesus declares that overlooked, exploited, brutalized lives are, in fact, of the greatest importance to God. In a world that says the life of a rich person is worth 28 times as much as the life of a working person, Jesus says that God pays special attention to those who are poor, struggling, and suffering. God cares. We are not alone.

Jesus calculus for the value of a life has little to do with a person's income or earning potential. To Jesus, our lives have innate value, in and of themselves. We have value because we are creatures, like sparrows. And we humans have value because we are made in God's image. To Jesus, our value does not lead to compensation or a guarantee of safety. It means that we receive attention. The God who cares for the welfare of sparrows also keeps track of every aspect of human lives, even tallying up the hairs of our heads. When Paul's description of divine love comes to a crescendo in I Corinthians 13, he promises that one day we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. We are already fully known, known more deeply than we even know ourselves.

There is nothing, not even the smallest thing, that is outside the circle of God's care. And if God cares about these little details, the sparrows of our lives, then how much more God cares about the greater shape of each life, and all of our lives in community. Community, after all, is essential to our value. Jesus speaks to the disciples as a group, using the plural forms of “you.” We cannot understand our own value without recognizing that the person next door and the person across the world have the same value. God's care is not for me alone or people like me, but for all of us.

When we feel secure in God's deep attention, knowledge, and care for us- in other words when we know that God loves us-then we are able to go forth without fear into a dangerous world. Then we can declare out loud the lessons we've heard whispered in darkened rooms. Then we can stop being afraid of those who wish us harm. When we are assured that our Creator loves us, we can remain steadfast even when our human families turn against us. We can be faithful even when our very lives are at risk. We can pick up our crosses, no matter the cost.

After the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund completed its work, Kenneth Feinberg received a call from the president of Virginia Tech, asking him to manage the fund that would distribute the compensation to the students and faculty killed in the 2007 mass shooting. “I realized that Feinberg the citizen should trump Feinberg the lawyer,” he said. “My legal training would no longer stand in the way.. This time all victims-students and faculty alike- would receive the same compensation.”

Sparrows and disciples alike: we know he watches us. To God, we matter. In God's sight, there are no unimportant lives.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.