

GOD WELCOMES ALL!

Jeremiah, perhaps the most reluctant of all God's prophets, was losing the "prophet debate" to Hananiah, the king's official prophet who was proclaiming peace through war. Jeremiah was making a scene. He was traipsing around town with an oxen yoke over his neck, to symbolize the harsh treatment God would allow the Babylonian conquerors to inflict upon God's people. Hananiah was attacking Jeremiah for his prophetic words and deeds, in effect calling him unpatriotic, not a true Jew. Jeremiah was harshly critical of the people, calling them to account for false faith, for practicing religion without justice, saying phony prayers and making sham sacrifices, for being church just for show. They were not loving their neighbors, taking care of widows and orphans, but loving their money, possessions and prestige. They were greedy, self-absorbed and self-righteous. They were not caring for the poor and the oppressed, the stranger and sojourner, but were bowing to the false gods of wealth and military might. Now, we know that Jeremiah must have been a true prophet. After all, the book of Jeremiah is in our Bible, right between Isaiah and Ezekiel. To the people of his time, Jeremiah was a nuisance, a creep preaching doom and gloom, and expecting too much from them—too much fidelity to God's Word, too much repentance and commitment to change. Hananiah, on the other hand, was a pleasing prophet, telling king and people what they wanted to hear. He had the king's ear and access to the media, claiming to be "fair and balanced." He came to silence this Jeremiah who was bad-mouthing the king and blaming Israel first. He took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah and broke it, proclaiming that within two years king Zedekiah's soldiers would quiet that ancient Iraq called Babylon. After all, the LORD God was on their side and with Zedekiah as righteous king they would prevail against the evil empire. But, this nobody, no-count Jeremiah, preaching "terror is all around," persisted. He came with a word, God's Word. God had not called Jeremiah to sell out to the king or to popular opinion. To the king's prophet Jeremiah said, "Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you. You have made this people trust in a lie. Within this year you will be dead, because you preach man's word as if it were God's, because you rebel against the LORD." The chapter ends with this: "In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died."

The prophet who prophecies peace when there is no peace shall reap the LORD's judgment. Best be wary of claiming your word to be God's. Best be wary of trusting the king's prophet. Welcome the true prophet. O.K., though the prophet's words be severely challenging, I will welcome God's prophet.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.

To follow in the Way of Jesus, to do God's Word, may put us in opposition to kings and presidents. We may even be opposed by members of our beloved family. Following Jesus is not necessarily the way to win friends and influence people. As today's reading from Paul reminds us, being Christian means living as a slave of Jesus—the Crucified One.

Discipleship. For these next few months, during this long season of “ordinary time,” much of what we will hear from Matthew’s gospel account will be about the often difficult road of discipleship. Just last Sunday, we heard the “sending words” of Jesus: “Go and make disciples, of peoples throughout the world make disciples, baptizing them into God’s kingdom and teaching them to follow in my Way.” Baptized into God’s kingdom, we no longer live to ourselves. We belong to God. We are God’s children now. With the embrace of baptism God has welcomed us and we are now God’s people of welcome, agents of reconciliation, instruments of God’s forgiveness, makers of peace, doers of justice, people of the towel and the basin, people attentive to the little ones and the least of these—welcoming the unwelcomed.

The church is God’s household of welcome. Notice, in the three verses of our Gospel reading the verb “welcome” appears six times. To welcome Jesus means to welcome the whole, hurting world. The door of the church stands wide open, not closed with just a peep hole through which we can check out the outsiders to see if they are worthy of our welcome. No. To welcome the whole, hurting world means sharing the world’s pain. Which takes us back to Jeremiah.

The king’s prophet, Hananiah, proclaimed “God’s on Our Side.” What a winning word. Politicians and people of every age promote their own pleasure and purpose by saying, “God’s on our side.” Dare we welcome the contradictory message and its messenger? Dare we welcome people with hurts and pains, including some with pains that we, the church, have inflicted?

On the sign out front it says, “All Are Welcome.” I think we intend to live up to that sign, to be a welcoming people. But it’s not enough to just open the door and assume that the outsider, the stranger will find the way in. We have to invite. We have to be clear, obvious and explicit about our welcome. Yesterday, Pastor Lisa and I, plus some others, took a little step to be more explicit about our welcome, as we walked with fellow Lutherans and other people of faith in the Celebrating Diversity Alaska Pride Parade. Very sadly, it ended almost before it began, with a very tragic accident.

Just because we put up a sign that says “All Are Welcome” does not mean that all actually feel welcome. It takes more than a sign to welcome strangers, especially when they feel like outsiders, harshly judged by the church and made to feel shame for who they are. What do we do about that? Allen Griswold, who hosted a Central Lutheran booth at the Fairview Block Party, tells me people there thought we are like a private club who does not welcome their kind. What do we do about that? Shall we find ways and means to explicitly invite and welcome people who may feel unwelcomed, whether gay or lesbian, tattooed, unemployed, whatever? What shall we do? Or is a sign “All Are Welcome” enough? Seriously, what shall we do? Could you make a point of talking about that today, perhaps during the picnic? Could you make a point of talking about it this week? Talking with each other? Talking with a council member? Talking with a pastor?

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.