

You Just Can't Win

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Caught between a rock and a hard place”, “Damned if you do; damned if you don’t”, “Having to choose the lesser of two evils”, “A real pickle”: we have lots of ways to describe the situation when it arises; but all of us have been there at one time or another. It happens when circumstances force you to have to choose between two or more options; but whichever you decide, the result is going to be something you don’t want. At such times it seems that you just can’t win. No matter what you do you’re going to lose. And I know you’ve been there before, haven’t you? It’s frustrating, isn’t it? That’s exactly what the prophet Jeremiah is complaining about in this morning’s Old Testament lesson: that the Lord has put him in a situation in which he just can’t win.

Jeremiah received God’s call to serve as his prophet during what were probably the darkest years of Judah’s history. The glory days of the nation under David and Solomon were things of the distant past, and the great days of the conquest of the land by Joshua were ancient history. Back in those days it seemed that God didn’t mind flexing his muscles to help his people out of their problems with mighty miracles and awesome wonders; but no one had seen anything like that lately. These days it was just one crisis after another. Militarily insignificant and politically powerless, the nation of Judah was trapped in the war zone between the two superpowers of the day, Egypt and Babylon; both of which wanted to maintain pressure on the other (in part) by controlling the land of Judah. So, Judah was like a soccer ball to be possessed by the stronger player.

Strangely enough though, as bad as the situation was, conventional wisdom in Judah was that things were pretty good. The leaders there figured that by playing their cards right they could always make sure that they were on the winning side. So they kept shifting their allegiance between these two powerful nations, depending on whichever seemed to have the upper hand at the moment. Unfortunately, their optimism was unfounded. They failed to grasp that in this game of ancient world cup soccer, no one is the friend of the ball. Whoever has it is going to kick it. The way they were playing politics there really was no way to win. Still, the political and religious leaders of Judah thought they had an ace in the hold. “We are God’s chosen people. His one and only temple where his presence dwells on earth with men is right here in our midst. God is on our side. What can possibly go wrong?”

In a word: plenty. The truth is that just as they had been playing the game of shifting and dividing their loyalties politically, they had been doing exactly the same thing in the practice of their religious faith. They had the Lord God whom they worshipped, of course; but, you know, there were lots of other gods out there who might prove to be helpful too. They thought it best to hedge their bets because you never knew which god might come through in a crunch. So, to play it safe, they worshipped many of them. Even in the holy temple of God, the living Lord had to compete for his people’s attention with a number of idols. And, as I’m sure you know, the Lord doesn’t much care for being one of the crowd. He refuses to share his glory with any other. As far as he’s concerned, you take only him, or you don’t take him at all. So, in their effort to cover all the bases with the gods, they lost the only One who really mattered.

The Lord directed Jeremiah to be the bearer of the bad news. His message to Judah was simple: "You've turned your back on the Lord. Now he's going to return the favor and turn his back on you." Against all the conventional wisdom and the smooth assurances of the establishment's priests and politicians, Jeremiah was to proclaim the coming destruction that was surely going to fall on Judah unless the people repented and returned to the Lord God alone.

At first, Jeremiah was very much intimidated by this task. He was only a youth – he describes himself as a mere child; and here he was expected to go head to head with the king, the high priest, and all the powerful officials and functionaries who worked for them. He told the Lord he couldn't do it, that no one would listen to him or take him seriously. But the Lord told him, "Don't be terrified of them. I've made you a fortified city, a pillar of iron, and a bronze wall to stand against them... They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I the Lord am with you and will rescue you."

Well, that sounded pretty encouraging. So, emboldened by the Lord's promises, Jeremiah began proclaiming the dire message he'd been given. And I think it would be fair to say that he expected to meet with at least some success. He anticipated that there would be some people – maybe a lot of people – who would respond to his call for repentance; and that maybe there might even be a great revival of the true faith in the nation. But nothing like that happened. Instead Jeremiah was treated pretty much like any fanatic walking around with a sandwich sign that reads, "Repent! The end is near." Initially people ignored him – all except for his friends, that is: they decided they'd better distance themselves from him. When he became more forceful in his message, people made fun of him. When he persisted, they decided he wasn't funny anymore. They resorted to violence; both of the informal mob variety, and when he still would not be silent, the authorities put him in stocks and subjected him to public humiliation. They were going to do whatever it took to get him to stop spreading his gloomy predictions.

And it seemed to work ... at least for a while. Disgusted, disappointed, and tired of playing God's fool, Jeremiah threw in the towel. "If this is what it means to be your prophet, Lord, get yourself another guy. I don't want any part of it. I won't speak in your name any more." It seemed the only logical thing for him to do. But Jeremiah soon found that it wasn't as easy as that. He made the mistake of thinking that God had chosen him to deliver a mere message. He seems to have forgotten that God's Word is more than just information; it's a living being – it's God revealing himself to people and changing them through his presence in his Word. By trying to suppress the message, Jeremiah found that he was trying to bottle up the Spirit of God within himself – which is not unlike trying to contain a nuclear blast in a paper bag. This is the predicament he complains of: "If I speak, people abuse me; if I try to be silent, your Word burns within me until I have to speak. Either way, I end up getting hurt. Lord, I just can't win."

Looking back on Jeremiah's dilemma, I think most of us would agree that he could have saved himself a lot of trouble by simply continuing to speak and taking the abuse of his countrymen, without trying to fight against God too. And yet, though it makes perfect sense, I wonder how many times you and I have been in the same situation and made the wrong choice? I mean God has given us his Word too, and he's appointed us to share it when we have the opportunity with those around us. How often do we choose silence for fear of facing the insults and mockery of family, friends, and neighbors?

I don't need to tell you that today the idea that there's a God out there who holds people morally accountable to his commandments is not well received by the world at large. People don't want to hear about God's law. They make fun of the idea that there will be a day of judgment. They want to be free to determine what's right and wrong, true and false for themselves. And having rejected the notion of an unchanging moral standard by which they will be judged, the same people have a hard time coming to grips with the fact that they are lost sinners in need of salvation. Or, if they allow the possibility of it, they imagine that they will fare pretty well in such a judgment because, after all, they do the best they can to live right, and they're not nearly as bad as some – including some hypocritical Christians whom they would be happy to name for you. Or, perhaps, they object to narrow exclusivity of our message: "You've got a lot of nerve thinking that your way is the only way." Or, maybe, they say they agree with you in principle, but they're too busy pursuing their work, pleasures, hopes, and dreams to bother with it. Whatever. The bottom line is that they don't want to hear it, and they will do what they must to silence you; resorting, if necessary, to laughing at you, calling you a hypocrite or fanatic; and if you persist, they're likely to treat you with anger or avoid you altogether.

And it works, doesn't it? They get us to hold our tongues. Now, don't get me wrong: I'm not advocating obnoxious, "in your face" style witnessing. I'm speaking of those times when you're with someone who needs to hear the truth, and the opportunity suddenly presents itself to give the reason for the hope you have in Christ; but you're embarrassed, so you don't say anything. Sometimes it happens when you're discussing an issue on which God has clearly spoken, something that in our times has become controversial and emotionally charged, like say abortion, or homosexuality, or divorce and remarriage, and to avoid an argument you fail to speak up. And then there are those times you're dealing with someone who is close to you, a family member or friend, who is living in an ongoing sinful situation – maybe they're having an affair, or cohabitating outside of marriage, or engaging in some questionable business practices. It could be that they're caught up in some kind of compulsive or addictive behavior with gambling or alcohol. You know it's going on. You know you ought to say something; but you're afraid of the backlash. So, paralyzed by fear of the consequences, like Jeremiah, you try to bottle up God's word within yourself.

And there are certain ways we use to help make it easier on ourselves to stifle the Word of God. One is through ignorance; and by that, I mean willful ignorance. We do it when we avoid delving more deeply into God's Word so that when a situation arises in which we might be expected to speak, we can lamely excuse ourselves by thinking, "I really don't know what to say. I'd probably say it wrong anyway." The heart of this approach is a lovelessness that says, "Just give me enough to save myself. I'm not worried about anyone else."

Another way we try to silence God's Word is to carefully omit those parts which we think are likely to cause controversy. We can speak in a vague sort of way about "safe" topics like Heaven, and angels, and Christian brotherhood; but we avoid things like Hell, and God's condemnation of certain sins and false teachings; and most importantly, we avoid speaking of Jesus who endured God's condemnation to save us. The problem with this sort of silence is that a message that is only part true usually reinforces in people a trust in something that is completely false.

And what happens when we try to silence God's Word? Because the Word is at work within us, the alarm of conscience goes off loud and clear: "You just threw away a perfect opportunity." And then all the attempts we use to excuse ourselves melt away under the heat of Jesus' words, "... whoever disowns me before men, I will disown before my Father in heaven." Our unwillingness to reach out to those who are spiritually lost, blind, and helpless comes back in the form of an accusation revealing what we are: selfish, unloving, and frozen with fear because we don't really trust the promise of Christ to preserve and protect us. It's that accusation that Jeremiah says burns within like a fire in the soul, compelling us to want to speak; but it alone is not able to overcome the fear. It only puts us in the "just can't win" situation of knowing what we *should* do, and feeling guilty because we don't.

But there is a solution to our "just can't win" situation. It's found in the "just can't win" situation that the Lord faced for us. Just as we don't want to face the consequences that may come of speaking God's Word, our Lord God recoiled at the price he had to pay to redeem us. To save us he had to lose his Son. But something far stronger than guilt was burning in his heart compelling him to go through with the plan of our salvation despite its great cost. It was his infinitely greater love. And God's love is able to break through what appears to be a "just can't win" situation. Because from what appeared to be the worse possible choice he could make, giving up his Son to the cross and death, came the great victory, and life and redemption for all. By this victory, Christ defeated Satan's power over us by taking away our guilt – even the guilt of trying to silence the Word of God. Now, for us, the burning of conscience is God's call to repent and be forgiven.

And so we do repent of the sin of remaining silent when we should speak. And as we do, we are once again assured of God's love and forgiveness. His love is there because he is there, living within us by his Spirit and Word of truth. And because he is there, we feel our hearts burning once again, no longer with guilt, but with his love. And his love drives out all fear. It gives us the strength and courage to break through our apparent "just can't win" situation, so that we gladly and boldly want to speak to those who need to hear God's Word to them. Just as Jeremiah said, "the Lord is with me as a dread warrior."

Does this mean that we won't meet opposition? Does it mean people won't attack us for our testimony to the truth? Certainly not. In fact, we can count on it, just as Jesus said, "A servant is not above his master." Jesus was abandoned by his disciples and tortured to death, and Jeremiah suffered the scheming and betrayal of his closest friends; how can we expect different treatment? Rather, we can face these perils with the absolute certainty that in Christ our final victory has already been won. We can suffer rejection, humiliation, violence, and even death with confidence that the Lord who has our hairs numbered will preserve us, body and soul, forever.

He's given us his Word. He gives us the faith to believe it. He motivates us with his love and empowers us to speak his Word to others. He forgives us when we fail. In spite of what seems to be a "just can't win" situation, the truth of the matter is that by trusting in him, *you just can't lose*. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!