

Sons and Daughters

One of the most common exam questions I used when I was teaching at the University of Washington was to ask students to “compare and contrast” two ideas. The two passages we just heard ask us to do the same this morning: to compare and contrast the experiences of these two people from different times and cultures whose stories seem so different at first listening. I want to look at the experiences of this son of Abraham (the prophet Jeremiah) and this daughter of Abraham (the unnamed crippled woman) and see what they teach us by their similarities and differences.

Jeremiah began his ministry sometime late in the 7th century BCE, and is believed to have lived in Egypt. His writings were gathered into the book that carries his name sometime in the middle of the 6th century BCE; he was deeply concerned with good and evil, faithfulness and disobedience. But we hear him this morning before all of that, when he is receiving his call to speak on behalf of God.

Jeremiah responded to that call very much as you or I would: I don’t know how to do it, I am not qualified, and I am too young. In that response, he joins a wide company of characters (Biblical and otherwise) who have felt unprepared for the role that God called them to. Time and again, God calls people who do not seem particularly well suited for the tasks they are given: Moses, Abraham, the disciples of Jesus (though they don’t seem to protest at their calling).

Interestingly, God is never dissuaded by these objections. God’s work – at least some of it – does not seem to require age, experience, training, education, or even desire to serve. The primary requirement seems to be a willingness to go when you are told to go, to speak when you are told to speak, and to lead when you are told to be a leader.

It is always a little hazardous to use the language of the New Testament when describing events in the Old Testament, but I am bold to say that the call of Jeremiah resulted in a resurrection experience for him (albeit with a small “r”). That is to say, Jeremiah entered a new life when he was called by God to speak as a prophet. Whatever his past occupation had been, it was now overshadowed by his new vocation: to speak the truth of God to the people of Judah.

The unnamed woman of the Gospel lesson for today, the one who had been crippled for 18 years, also experienced a kind of small “r” resurrection. We know very little about her, except for the nature and duration of her disability. Do not, by the way, be distracted by the explanation of infirmity as being caused by a “spirit.” Remember that the Bible is not a medical textbook, but a rendition of human experience. Surely the woman who was disabled felt as though there was a “load on her back,” that she was carrying a burden that was not of her own making.

Whatever the cause of her disability, the ending of it came quickly and decisively: *“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”* [Luke 13:12] Her resurrection came in

healing: her ability to participate again, fully and freely, in the life around her. Her response to that healing is immediate and dramatic: she “*began praising God.*” [Luke: 13:13]

This woman, like Jeremiah, had been called. But rather than being called into new service, she was called from her disability. If the voice of call beckoned Jeremiah forward, it nudged the woman from behind. The result, of course, was very much the same: new life.

There is a rueful saying among clergy, that “no good deed goes unpunished,” and this seems to be Jesus’ experience, too. No sooner had the woman had the miraculous experience of healing than a critic appeared.

As often happens in the gospel, the critic is identified as a “leader of the synagogue.” This leader began to speak to the gathered crowd, telling them (basically) that they ought not to come expecting healing on the Sabbath, but should come on other days for that.

Jesus is harsh with this leader, and we are inclined to agree with him. His understanding of the Sabbath laws seems heartless and legalistic. We are standing in solidarity with the woman, and joining her in praising God. What is this leader of the synagogue thinking?

I wonder if he is thinking about his love and reverence for the Sabbath. We have largely lost our sense of Sabbath in our time and place (though several authors have written books in recent years urging us to return to this ancient practice). We have forgotten what it might mean to truly set aside a day, every week, in which we refrain from working so that we can relax, worship, and refresh ourselves for the week ahead. We have forgotten what it would mean to have a practice that sets us apart from others and requires that we make choices to maintain that practice. We just don’t do any of that.

But the leader of the synagogue did do those things. And all of them were threatened by this itinerant preacher and healer, this person who disregarded the rules of the Sabbath and encouraged all of these other people to do the same. And so he did all he could think of to get things right again: he scolded the people who were, in his eyes, threatening the Sabbath.

We are, I think, more like this leader of the synagogue than we would like to admit. We, like him, try to protect those times, events, and places that are sacred to us. We do not want kickball played in our sanctuary – even while the pews are gone! We want special chalices and plates when we celebrate Holy Communion, not everyday dishes. We want quiet reverent prayers before meals – except maybe at camp. And we do, I have to say, feel free to scold the people who do not honor our customs.

What Jesus does in this story (even though he does it rather harshly) is to relativize the claims of religious customs and practices. Whether we are talking about observing the Sabbath, conducting the sacraments of the church, or arguing about where the candles go on Christmas Eve – all of those most sometimes be set aside.

The sad irony of all this is that each of those customs and practices was originally devised and then regularized because it helped people to listen faithfully to the call of God. The purpose of Sabbath is to honor God, not to keep the rules. Or as Jesus will say in other place, "Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath." The purpose of the sacraments is to bring us closer to God in a bodily and intense way, not to keep require special dishes and specific words. Even the Christmas Eve candles are supposed to remind us of the light of the world, not of the pettiness of humans.

That is why I say that Jesus relativized the claims of religious customs and practices. He did not ask us to give them up, nor even to change them. He only asked us not to let them become idols – things that we worship instead of worshipping and serving God.

And so it turns out that our exam question here is a little more complicated than to compare and contrast the experiences of Jeremiah and the crippled woman. To reflect on their stories is also to reflect on the story of the leader of the synagogue, and upon our own stories.

All of these stories remind us that we are people of the Resurrection: we are called to new life, again and again. Sometimes that call is life-changing because it invites us into new ways of service. Sometimes that call is life-changing because it invites us into renewed health and wholeness. And sometimes that call is life-changing because it invites us to more thoughtful and humble expression of our faith. May we always be open to hearing God's call, no matter how surprising, inconvenient, or demanding that call may be.

Amen.

Prayer for August 26, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

God of all times and places, we offer our prayers today for our own congregation on the anniversary of its founding..

We thank you for the pioneers who came before us and established a church here in your name and in the Congregational tradition. We remember their faithfulness, their determination, and their generosity, and we pray that we may be their spiritual heirs in all of these virtues.

We thank you, too, for the women and men who carried forward these ideals through the years, who invested their talents and energies in the congregation and the community. We are grateful for the bonds they formed with other churches, and for the worship, education, and outreach we have shared with our sisters and brothers. Let our continuing work and support for the church, the community, and the world be a living prayer of thanksgiving for their legacy to us.

And we thank you for calling us, in this century, to be part of the Body of Christ in this place. Inspire us, we pray, to honor the traditions of the past while moving boldly into your future. Help us to speak your word in today's words, and to follow your way in today's ways.

But we remember too, O Holy One, that being your church is easy on days of celebration; grant us the courage and stamina to be your church on the ordinary days, the days of challenge and crisis, the days of sorrow and blessing, the days of abundance and of need.

We confess to you our temptation to allow our congregation to be a theological debating club, or a community betterment society, or a social service agency. These are worthy activities, but they are not enough to make us your church. When we are tempted to be less than you call us to be, shake us back into clarity about our vocation as your hands, your voice, your feet, your heart. Interrupt our preoccupation with meetings and events, startle us out of our tired habits of worship, and scuttle our careful plans for the future. Ignite us, instead, with the power of your spirit, that it may fill us with the fire of our love for you and of our longing for the promised world of your Shalom.

All this we pray in the name of the one who lived among us as our brother, and lives among us still as our Risen Savior, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

A version of this prayer was offered on September 17, 2007 (Sesquicentennial)