

## TOUGH TEXTS

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Scripture: Jeremiah 18: 1-11, Luke 14: 25-33

Like most clergy I start off any preparation for preaching with prayer. I ask God to help me remain open to the leading of the spirit. I give thanks that we have, in Scripture, such amazing testimony to the community of faith, the people of God who have tried to live faithfully, remaining in relationship with God and with one another. But I confess to you that often, before I look at the lectionary to see what the Scripture readings are for a particular Sunday, before those appropriate prayers, those conversations with God that are preparation for studying God's word, before any of that, I try to do a little bargaining. You know what I mean. I revert to those prayers of childhood, those prayers that were hard driving bargains, those prayers that were only slightly short of being bribery.

Years ago, the simplest prayer was something like this: Dear God, just let me kick this ball over the playground fence so my team will win the slug championship for Wollaston School. Just let me do this and I'll never ask you another thing. Or another more complicated but still falling into the bribery category: Oh God, let me finish this Word Wealth Notebook and I'll never, never let things go until the last minute. That sounds better because something is demanded from us. Never mind that the something demanded from us we probably can never or at least will never deliver. The point is that that we all have tried to bribe God, tried to drive a clever bargain with the One who made heaven and earth. How foolish of us!!

Yet this is exactly what I found myself doing as I began thinking about preaching again in your midst after more than six months of being away. I began to pray that childish bargaining or bribery prayer. Dear God, I'm heading back to UCC at The Villages after being gone for half a year. That congregation is so dear. You know we love being with them and I want this sermon to be really good. God, I'm not asking that you put the words down on paper or that give me the ideas. I am willing to do the work. All I ask is that the Scripture lessons, the texts that are indicated for this Sunday be good ones. A nice little word study would work out well. I could show off a bit using my Greek and Hebrew. But that's not essential, God. Just don't let the texts be about anything controversial and don't make them too demanding. Please God, don't ask more of us than we can deliver. If you'd just do this for me, I'll be good. I'll listen more and talk less. I'll give more money. I'll eat fewer chocolate chip cookies. I'm sure even God knows how desperate I am when I make that promise. There was a stage musical a few years back with the intriguing title "Your Arms Are Too Short to Box With God". I never saw it but the title always comes back to me when I find myself in the midst of one of those bargaining/bribery prayers. I have nothing with which to bargain. God doesn't want me to give more money or eat fewer chocolate chip cookies or even talk less and listen more. God doesn't want me to do or not do anything..... unless it contributes to the strength of the loving relationship with God and with my neighbor. But even though I know all that, there I was in front of my computer opening the Bible and hoping that Jeremiah 18 and Luke 14 are the kinds of scripture passages that lead to a warm, fuzzy sermon with nothing controversial and nothing too challenging.

Well, does God have a sense of humor or what? I asked for no tough texts and of course, what appears right there in the common lectionary, shared by all major Protestant denominations, right there in black and white are not one but two impossibly tough texts. In the first lesson, the prophet, Jeremiah, describes an almost petulant God who threatens to "shape evil" against those who do evil in God's sight. Sounds like a tough bargaining session to me. And the bargaining chips are all on God's side.

So I say to myself, "Edee, just ignore that Jeremiah text and go to the Luke passage. Surely there will be something there that fits the bill." Right. The Luke passage is one of many lessons that Jesus gives about the cost of discipleship and this lesson starts with the straightforward statement, "Sell your possessions and give alms."

So there is no hiding place in the Luke passage either. It offers a challenge that is a central focus of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Possessions, material things, money and the stuff that we acquire with that money- all these can get in the way of our relationship to God and our relationship to each other. It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven. No one can serve both God and mammon (another word for materialism). These are just a few of the sayings of Jesus that indicate his strong belief that money and possessions get in the way of the good news that we are loved by God and we are called to live out that love as we move about in this world. Jesus himself lived and died and beyond explanation rose again to proclaim that good news. Even if we ignore the directive to give up all our possessions there are other ideas in this passage from Luke that may give us pause. Listen again to the opening sentence. "Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus and he turned and said to them." As an aside, I can just hear the apostles. "Now, this is more like it. Jesus is really getting popular. Look at the size of this crowd." I'm sure the apostles were hoping for a nice message full of hope and love- perhaps with a few phrases like life of ease thrown in for good measure. They wanted to draw in more and more people. And it was beginning to happen. Crowds were gathering- crowds that were enthusiastic as well as large. They were traveling with Jesus. They wanted to be part of the group that called themselves disciples. And of course that is why Jesus gives the talk that I label as tough.

I often notice signs outside of churches when I can tell the preacher is preaching on the same text that I am tackling. I saw one titled "The Cost of Discipleship". A friend of mine titled her sermon on this passage, "Discipleship for Dummies". Both titles show that the preachers are trying to emphasize the idea that Jesus wanted to be simple, wanted to be absolutely clear to his hearers in the first century about what it meant to follow him.

It is true for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well. If we claim to be followers of Jesus, if we think of ourselves as part of the body of the risen Christ, then we must not kid ourselves. There is a cost, a price to be paid. Simply put that price is that nothing, absolutely nothing can come ahead of our relationship to God. No work, no possession, no organization, no family relationship, nothing can come before the love of God that we know in Jesus the Christ.

In this society we are not used to thinking about the cost of our faith. We are not persecuted. We are not forbidden the expressions of our faith. In fact, it appears as if the culture actually encourages faith. But appearances can be deceiving. If we get comfortable in the society, if we begin to think that what society values is automatically what God desires, then we miss the cost of our discipleship, our desire to follow Jesus, to be a part of the body of the risen Christ.

A church can fall into the trap as easily as an individual. A church in its desire to bring folk in may steer clear of a prophetic voice that says, "Reach out to the poor and the oppressed. Welcome those that society would cast out." As disciples of the risen Christ that is what we are called to do. The cost to us may be that we give away our pride in being a certain kind of church. The cost to us may be that others look down upon us.

Perhaps we allow the church itself to divide over issues that are not central to who it is that we are called to be as disciples of Christ. Maybe then the possession we must give up is a picture that we hold of ourselves as a peace-loving group. Maybe we will find the true peace of Christ in the way that we stand together in spite of our differences and disagreements. Perhaps we will then discover the power of the words of Jesus, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Perhaps then we can look at these tough texts and see in them the strength of God's love for us. And we may realize the amazing life in store for us as we respond to that love by reaching out to those around us. Then we may know what it is to be the clay in the hands of a loving potter. May it be so for all of us this day and always.

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