

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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Finding Hope in Difficult Words
Jeremiah 1:4-10, I Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30

There are times when difficult words need to be said. In the Bible, these are often said by prophets chosen by God. Sometimes the words can be couched in language which softens the blow. Other times it cannot.

Jeremiah was one of those prophets chosen to say the difficult words of truth. Today we heard about his call by God. Jeremiah heard God say, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” But Jeremiah was a little reluctant. He pointed out his shortcomings. Do you remember Jeremiah’s objection? But I don’t know how to speak, I am too young. I am only a boy. There were a couple of other prophets who felt they weren’t up to the call too. Remember Moses had a speech difficulty but God called him to go and tell Pharoah, “let my people go!”

And then there was Jonah. He didn’t want to go to Ninevah. Not because there was anything wrong with Jonah’s ability to speak but because there was something wrong with Ninevah. Jonah didn’t feel they deserved to be saved.

But God fixed all three of these situations. God gave Moses his brother Aaron to speak when necessary. God sent Jonah a big fish to swallow him and deliver him onto the shores of Ninevah. And God touched and put words in the

mouth of Jeremiah. You see, it is not us who determine who is able and called, it is God. It is a difficult lesson to learn. God does not call those who are able. God enables those who God calls.

So Jeremiah is to go the Israelites with some very difficult words. They have been worshipping idols and false gods and listening to false prophets. God sends Jeremiah with the message that it is too late to repent, the Babylonians will come and they will be sent into exile. God has appointed Jeremiah “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow.” As you can imagine, Jeremiah runs into some difficulty, he is beaten, jailed, and almost killed.

Jesus too has some words that are difficult to hear for his people. This is a story we heard read in Mark a few months ago. Yet Luke puts a different shading to it. Jesus is in his home town and has just read beautifully in the temple. He has just told the people that the passage he has read has been fulfilled in their hearing. Unlike Mark, in Luke the people initially seem to be congratulating Jesus and marveling at how he is one of them. But then Jesus sees through their superficial acceptance and challenges them. He says you will now want me to perform miracles. But you will not truly accept me here. It will be just as it was with Elijah and Elisha. The Israelites who thought they were so righteous before God did not accept them, but the unclean foreigners, the outcast widow and leper did. So of course Jesus gets into some trouble here. The people understand that he is

comparing them to the Israelites who did not listen to Elijah and Elisha. They attempt to throw him off a cliff. It is only the first angry crowd he will face.

Then we have Paul's beautiful poetry about love. He tells them all the wonderful things that love, true love is. Although this is a reading you will often hear at a wedding, Paul is not talking about romantic love, or love between two people or love in a family. And he is not waxing philosophically. Paul is trying to get a point across to a church with deep problems and divisions. He is actually chastising them. After the beautiful poetry provides an example of the loving way they should behave, we hear him say, when I was a child I acted like a child but now I have grown up. "You are all acting childish, grow up!" He tells them that everything: the skills and abilities you have, all you are, all you do adds up to nothing, unless it comes from and is filled with love.

So here we have three messages of difficult words. Jeremiah- exile is inevitable. Jesus- you who think you are righteous are not listening. Paul- you all need to grow up. Where is the hope in these difficult words?

We begin with the message of love. The love that Paul has described is unconditional love, patient, kind, forgiving. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, it is eternal. It is a gift from God. God wants us to learn to love each other as God loves us. To listen to and learn from each

other as we listen to and learn from God. To hear the warning, the guidance given, and even the hope in difficult words.

Yes, there is hope in the difficult words. Jeremiah is sent “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow,” but also “to build and to plant.” There was an exile, yet God did not abandon them. God went with them and even though they were exiled, it was a time of building and planting.

And Jesus’ difficult words were a challenge to the people. Some were angry and tried to harm him. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. Yet others, led by the Spirit of God, heard the message he had for them of hope and new life and so he “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Today we will have our Annual meeting. It is a celebration of last year and a beginning for the new year ahead. Like many churches and organizations we have our challenges. Very few us have the money, the membership, energy or growth that they are looking for.

The people who will give reports today have some good and hopeful, and some difficult words to say. We need to pray for them; that just like the prophets, they will be empowered by God to speak the truth. We pray that they will say them in love and that they will bring hope with them.

Those of us who will be listening also need prayer. That we will receive in the words a gift from God. That we will receive them in love. And that we will hear the challenge and rise to the hope that is before us.

We have been given the gift of a new day and a new year. We have been given the opportunity to learn, and grow, and repent- to turn a new direction where we need to and to hear the hope, even in difficult words. And that hope is the promise and the truth, that God wants the best for us, and God is with us, always.