

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

Jeremiah 2:4-13

In last week's first reading, we were introduced to the prophet Jeremiah and how he was ordained to speak God's word, God's own thoughts, to his people in very troubling times. God reached out to him and touched his mouth and made him literally God's spokesman. Today, in the second chapter of this scripture, we hear what God says through him. And it is extremely sad. Do you hear the plaintive sadness in God's words? What wrong did you find in me that you abandoned me? Instead of asking the faithful question 'how can you help us now, God?', you tried to answer your own question by embracing worthless things, leaving yourselves to become worthless yourselves. Your priests didn't ask for me, nor did your leaders or even your prophets. I had shown you already, says God, that when your lives were a wandering wilderness wasteland, that I had the power and the will to save you and lead you to my own place of peace and plenty. I really did want you to thrive. It has been my dream yesterday, today, and forever. But you left me. You have forsaken me. Instead of sharing your questions with me, instead of receiving living refreshment from me, you have tried to dig your own cisterns in the dry land, where they ultimately crack and fail and can store no life-sustaining water. At least not enough. You have made two mistakes which grieve my heart: First, you rejected me and everything I wanted to mean to you, and then you thought you could replace me and prove to me that you didn't need me. I am desperately sad that you would treat me like this, and that generations of your children will surely endure the gloomy consequences of your vanity. Though I made you, love you, and want desperately to keep you, you want to dissolve our relationship, and I have to ask, 'why would you want to do that?'

(Read responsively Psalm 81:1, 10-16)

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Some 600 years after the time of Jeremiah, the author of the essay we call The Book of Hebrews is still trying to convince anyone who will listen that being in right relationship is worth more than what the world might imagine or expect. And now, the author is able to demonstrate the essence of that relationship in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the dream that is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus is the one who was and is and is to come. And how does that dream become reality, how is it born and sustained in our hearts despite conflict and crucifixion? The author's best guess is that the timeless dream of God is found in mutual love, in not neglecting to show love and hospitality. To use the example of Christ. To resist the seduction of false security, lust, fear, and greed. To reach out and share the suffering of others. To make the sacrifices which love encourages, even during the deepest and darkest times. These things, says the early Christian author, will enrich our confidence. It all sounds like good advice. But more than that, it promotes a fellowship where God's dream can take root and grow and flourish. A garden which, even in dry or frosty seasons, can bear useful fruit. "The lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What harm can anyone do to me?"

Luke 14:1, 7-14

A few weeks ago I ran into one of my piano tuning colleagues whom I hadn't seen in while. Actually, it was at the calling hours for another piano tuner friend of ours who had passed away. For such occasions I usually wear my clerical collar, which helps me, and others I guess, to remember that God is in the room with us. It creates some interesting opportunities. One time I wore it while shopping at BJ's, and a mother and father and their little girl who were shopping for school supplies approached me and asked: 'Father could you pray with us and ask God to bless the new school year for our

daughter?’ Anyway, there at the funeral home my piano tuner friend uncharacteristically opened up to me, telling me about his fears and hopes and dreams, and we had a deeper conversation than we had ever had in years of working together. When we parted, we both agreed that we should get together again soon to continue our conversation, and that we should invite our other tuner friends to join us. Not, this time, to talk shop or have one of our monthly chapter business meetings, but to give fellowship a try. Not to dwell on form, but on sincere personal content. So, my friend sent out an email blast suggesting that we gather for such an experience, and several others began to chime in with reply-all. Everyone wanted to put in their 2 cents.

Should we meet on this particular day or that? Where should we meet? Should we have a meal together? Should we invite our various spouses and significant others? Should we advertise the gathering? Should we insist on wearing masks? How, when, where, and why? Well, the dreamers suggested we come to their backyards for beer and pizza. The rationalists though we should go to a restaurant where neither weather nor preparing food would be a burden. The apprentices wondered if they could ask some technical piano questions, or whether it would just be a party. And so on. My email inbox is now full of responses to a simple idea for a time of deeper personal conversation prompted by a chance meeting at that Baldwinsville funeral home. Now, I am gratified by the response and especially by the desire to gather together, but I’m mystified by all the random opinions and contingencies that have arisen. Yesterday everyone was leaning towards gathering on our usual third-Tuesday meeting, ordering a take-out pizza, and setting aside some random conversation time after our regular business meeting! That would be in place of our usual technical presentation. Somehow the basic idea has gotten lost.

I think that may have something to do with what Jesus is saying in our reading from Luke this morning. Form or content, which is most important? What is the faithful thing to do? Like Jeremiah and the author of Hebrews, Jesus comes down on the side of deeper and more sincere relationships. The gathering to which he and his colleagues, the influential rabbis, have been invited, is, he thinks, an opportunity for witnessing to God’s grace. Yet he sees some jockeying for the prized places at the head table and others trying to outdo each other in leadership. All of which, he says, are bad table-manners. And, of course, he speaks up. Biblical commentaries call what he says a ‘parable’, but did you notice in the reading that it’s not about some king or landowner, or some other third party? Here Jesus uses second person when addressing the guests and the host. He says plainly “You” are invited, You should invite the poor, You should sit at a lower place, and so on. The form of the gathering is less important than its content, he says, and it’s no cryptic parable to be unraveled...it’s simple and good advice, provided that one truly wants to witness to a right relationship with God and God’s people. No beating around the bush here!

Friends, it gives me great spiritual distress that Jeremiah might be right; that God might feel profound sadness when I seem to abandon him (or her). But I am reassured by the hope that God’s grace, God’s unconditional love, is indeed the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and that if I continue to ask the question ‘what is the faithful thing to do?’ I will be restored to a better path. And that if we persistently bring that question to the table together, that we will find others there who are devoted to asking that same question, too. And there at table, in deeper and more sincere conversation, we may include angels we hadn’t expected, and that we will find God intending to participate with us. Amen.

