

Sermon 6-21-26
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Based on the First Lesson and Gospel for The 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Jeremiah 20:7-13
and Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

Punching Bags

Let me boil down today's first lesson and today's Gospel lesson for you.

YAHWEH to Jeremiah: Jeremiah, I have called you to represent me and speak my Words for me.

Jeremiah: Great.

YAHWEH: And I have called you to be a punching bag for me.

Jeremiah: Great. When do I start? Uh . . . wait a minute. What?!

JESUS to the Apostles: Behold I am sending you out to do great miracles; to heal the sick; even raise the dead; and preach the Gospel wherever you go.

Apostles: Wow! That's fantastic!

JESUS: And I'm also sending you out as a bunch of punching bags.

Apostles: Great. When do we start? Uh . . . wait a minute. What's that part about punching bags?

In other words, both these lessons declare that Yahweh's people absolutely undergo persecution in this world and in this age. Why?

Let's take the situation in Jeremiah's time. Geopolitically the little kingdom of Judah, present day Israel, sat between two powerful ancient empires. Egypt was to the South and West. Babylon was to the North and East. Because of this location, the kings of Judah often politically played off the kings of Babylon and Egypt against each other. This was and is a very dangerous political game. Therefore, the right choice of who to side with absolutely had to be made, or else. That's the Geopolitical element.

But there was another, more important element — Judah's relationship with Yahweh, the God who had claimed Israel as His own people. In Jeremiah's time the Israelites had been wavering between two opinions for nearly a thousand years. Sometimes the Israelites and their kings would recognize and serve Yahweh. At other times they would recognize and serve foreign false gods and goddesses like Baal. After a thousand years, Yahweh had had enough. That's the spiritual element.

In Jeremiah's time the spiritually fickle King of Judah, Zedekiah, and his advisors had made the wrong spiritual choice. They were not true to Yahweh. As a result, they had made the wrong geopolitical choice. They thought Egypt was powerful enough to save them, and all Judah, from the Babylonians. But they thought wrong. Even Judah's prophets falsely prophesied that Babylon's power would fail. So when Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came against Judah with a massive army, Judah resisted, expecting Egypt to come and win the day for them.

It was into this politically and spiritually charged situation that Yahweh sent Jeremiah. Jeremiah preached extensively against Israel's idolatry, proclaiming that Israel would be

destroyed if it did not repent of its idolatry. When you tell people that they are living and doing evil and that they absolutely need to repent or perish, do people thank you and love you for doing so? They ought to. But they don't. Sin wants to do what sin wants to do. And if it wants to worship Baal instead of Yahweh, no amount of warning will change things. The only thing that will happen is that the person doing the warning will become a punching bag. And that's what happened to Jeremiah.

But it gets worse. There were many false prophets in Judah telling the people that nothing was going to happen to them if they chose to worship Baal and the other gods. This made Jeremiah's job all the more difficult and made the people want to punch him more.

And it gets even worse than that. When Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came and besieged Judah and Jerusalem, Yahweh gave Jeremiah a very simple Word to proclaim to Zedekiah, his leaders and all Judah — surrender to the King of Babylon and it will go well with you. He's going to win big in the contest with Egypt. Yahweh is on his side and is using him for specific purposes.

However, the Word from Yahweh that Jeremiah preached sounded like absolute treason to the king and his leaders who were trying to keep the people fighting against the Babylonians. What do you do with treasonous people? You not only punch them, you have them put to death. And that almost happened to Jeremiah several times.

Now, because the king and his leaders ultimately refused to listen to Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar conquered the land, destroyed Jerusalem, slaughtered its people and carried off most of the remaining people to a seventy year exile in Babylon. It would have been much easier if Judah and its king had obeyed the Word of the Lord from Jeremiah. How tragic. But when false gods and false ideas get locked in peoples' heads and hearts, colossal tragedy can be the only outcome.

And as for Jeremiah, not only did he become a punching bag for telling people what they did not want to hear, he had to watch his beloved land and people get crushed and destroyed for their impenitence and disobedience. Jeremiah is not called the weeping prophet for nothing. So, telling Yahweh's Truth to large numbers of people who believe lies is a sure fire method of getting persecuted. Telling large numbers of people what they don't want to hear is very dangerous.

Now, let's turn to the Apostles. In last week's Gospel we saw Jesus send out the twelve with this charge Matthew 10:6-8, "6. . . 'go . . . to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 And proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. . . ."

That sounds like important and exciting work that should be well received. But today we saw Jesus warn his disciples about the conditions under which He was sending them. Jesus said in Matthew 10:16, "'Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. . . .'" Gee. Thanks, Jesus. We're going to get eaten — no? Yes. You stand a chance of getting eaten.

And so Jesus told them the reason why in Matthew 10:24-25, "24 'A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.'"

With these words, Jesus prophesied what was going to happen to Him. He would be rejected by His people and mercilessly put to death through crucifixion. God, the Son, Himself came as a lamb in the midst of wolves. His apostles would face the same situation.

Now, Jesus explained why people would have a hard time with Him in John chapter 8. He told an increasingly hostile crowd in John 8:43-47, "43 'Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. 44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.'"

Here Jesus made a fantastic claim indirectly that He made more directly elsewhere. Jesus said that to listen to Him was to listen to Yahweh Himself. Thus, if people could not bear to hear His words, it was because they were not of Yahweh. In fact, they were of the devil. No wonder that at the end of the dialogue in chapter 8 people wanted to stone Jesus to death.

Jesus is saying the same thing directly to you and to me. If you cannot receive all of my Word to you — all of it — it's because you are of your father, the devil. Tell me. How do you react to that? Want to use Him as a punching bag? Want to use any of His apostles, disciples and preachers as punching bags if they tell you that? Therefore, do you see why Jesus was a lamb in the midst of wolves and anyone He commissioned to preach the Gospel was a lamb in the midst of wolves, even if they did great miracles of healing and comfort just like Jesus did?

OK. This Father's Day, let's be clear about what Jesus is telling us. When you and I were born, when our mothers brought us into this world, spiritually we were born children of Satan. Satan is our father. In what sense? Original Sin makes us our own gods who must define and decide good and evil for ourselves. Therefore, we can define good and evil any way we want and then act on our definitions. In so doing, we tell righteous Yahweh, our Creator and the Creator of everything, to bug off. That's what Satan did and does. That's what makes Satan our father as we are naturally born into this world.

Having Satan as our father puts us all on a road of conflict with our Creator, Yahweh, that can only end one way. If we follow Satan and his angels throughout life by impenitently insisting on being our own gods and goddesses, then we will follow those rebels right into the Lake of Fire. All who go into the Lake of Fire will have the privilege of being their own gods and goddesses to the absolute max, something that Yahweh holds all of us back from here. Hell is hell because of the maximum evil all will fall into there, being their own gods and goddesses.

So, like Jeremiah, is Jesus warning us for our good, out of His great love? That's the hard thing to see and believe. For, those fathered by the devil cannot see the Love. They can only see the warning as a bitter maximum offense worthy of a violent response. And that's why they want to kill anyone who gives them Yahweh's warning. Therefore, anyone who lovingly preaches the loving warning of our loving Father in heaven always runs the danger of being a punching bag.

And this is true even when the powerful good news of the Gospel is preached. For those fathered by the devil can only hear this: What? You're saying I need this Gospel because I'm not a good person?? How dare you? And them's fightin' words! It's punching bag time again.

So, fathered by the devil, we just can't bear Yahweh's Truth. Therefore, how is it that anyone can be rescued from this impossible situation? Scripture tells us that God Himself

must do what no one else can do. God Himself must make the impossible possible. God Himself must make us His children. This is known as the Grace of God.

Our Loving Father in heaven Himself must give us ears to hear His Truth and hearts to believe it and minds to understand what it all means. He does this through the means of Grace. His gracious Word is preached to us. His sacraments are administered to us. This is the means of grace. And He sends His Holy Spirit to dwell in us and generate faith in what we have heard and seen so that we may be rescued from the devil.

Jesus put it this way. John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” John 3:5, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” This birth is from our Loving Father in heaven. As we read in John 1:12-13, “12 But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Only Yahweh Himself can rescue children of the devil and birth them into His own righteous children. He does this through the forgiveness of sins Jesus won for us by His perfect atoning work on the cross. For where the mound of sin is forgiven and carted away only righteousness remains. Where a debt is forgiven there are no further payments to be made. Jesus’ blood paid for it all.

Yes it is true. You may be a good person by earthly standards or by your standards. But you are not a good person by the pure righteous standards of your perfect Father in heaven. In fact, if you think you’re a good person by your own standards, that’s just you acting as a child of the devil and setting your own standards.

Thus, you need Jesus in a very desperate way. So do I. Without Him we have no pardon. We remain the slaves to sin that we heard about in the second lesson. Without Jesus we have insufficient righteousness to stand under the Judgment of God. We will be rejected as imperfect and impure.

With Jesus, on the other hand, all that changes. We have pardon. We are no longer slaves to sin. We give up being our own gods and determining our own standards of good and evil. Jesus alone has sufficient righteousness to satisfy the judgment of God against us. So if we are with Jesus, He covers us with His righteousness. We become slaves of His righteousness instead of slaves of sin. We are no longer slaves to our own willful determination to define things for ourselves. With Jesus, God the Son, we are received and adopted by God, the Father in heaven, as His true children.

Therefore, on Father’s Day, this is the true, loving Father we all need to give thanks and praise to. By His grace our Father in heaven does for His children what no one else can do. Our earthly fathers may have been there for us. But in no way can they compare to our Father in heaven. In fact, the best earthly fathers are those who seek to do the will of their Father in heaven. For there is none like Him.

Now, in closing, when the Word of God alone does its work, when Faith from God alone comes down, when all this Grace alone from God is spread over us, and God rescues us thereby from sin, death and the devil, the result is the birth of a true child of God, saved for righteous eternal resurrected life with their righteous Creator Father God. Therefore, whoever is sent to preach the Word of Truth rejoices greatly whenever this happens. For, it makes all the danger of becoming a punching bag worth it. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.