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“Stuck in the Mud”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Jer. 38:4–6, 8–10; Ps. 130; Heb. 12:1–4; Lk. 12:49–53

Jeremiah and Jesus are prophets of God. God called them. They were commissioned to bear throughout the course of their lives, the defining task of bearing the Word of God to God’s people. In today’s OT reading, Jeremiah is stuck in the mud. In the Gospel, Jesus has an “an impassioned outburst” that reveals the depth of his own sense of purpose. His preaching on the Kingdom will generate some heat as well as light. The fire he wants to cast on the earth burns within him as a powerful force for the Kingdom.

I would like to reflect with you on the importance and the need of prophetic witness and the subsequent willingness to pay the price, to accept the cost of that witness. It’s not just meant for the great major prophets of the Old Testament, and clearly, it’s not only meant for the Son of the Living God, *the* Prophet of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. But each and every one of us, by virtue of our baptisms, has been commissioned as prophets of the Word. So let’s learn from the Prophet Jeremiah and this outburst from Jesus about the cost of discipleship as we run together the long race of the life of faith.

Jeremiah stuck in the mud is a very vivid image. Sometimes, we use the expression, “the pits;” we talk about having mud up to our ears; we speak of being buried in the dirtiness and the messiness of life. But here, we have an image of the great prophet Jeremiah being lowered into the deep cistern of the court of the guard, paying the price of speaking truth to power.

A little historical context: Judah and Jerusalem were under siege by the Babylonians. Babylonia had already won the war, but their entrance into the city had not yet occurred. King Zedekiah was a puppet of the Babylonians, but he was doing a double-cross with them. He wanted to make a secret pact with the Egyptians to thwart any possibility of the city to be occupied. And so, what did Jeremiah recommend to the king and his princes, the officials of the court? Surrender. He told them that it was in their best interests to surrender. In fact, in a word just before the opening reading, we hear this: “Thus says the Lord, This city shall surely be handed over to the army of the king of Babylon and be taken” (Jer. 38:3).

You can imagine the officials at court did not easily hear this prophetic word because they immediately saw that this major, religious figure of the time, a prophet of God, was telling the king to surrender to the enemy. All the officials were then not very amused by this discouraging word. The military would lose heart, and this destructive word would destroy the morale of the people under siege. So what did they want to do? They wanted to get rid of this inconvenient prophet and get permission of the king to bury him in the cistern up to his ears in mud.

The message is that his prophetic witness involves a willingness to pay the price that ensues. And we heard that the Lord God delivered him, rescued him by Ebedmelech, a foreigner, so that he could preach and teach a word of truth to the powers that be yet another day.

The Lord Jesus had an outburst; it was almost out of character with him. All through Luke, chapter 12, he has been teaching us about the meaning of discipleship, about its content, about how it looks and how it feels, its costs, its demands. And then all of a sudden, we hear this outburst about what he’s come to do. And we get a glimpse that his heart is imbued with a fire that won’t go out; a fire that he wished were already fully kindled. He is no reluctant prophet like Jeremiah. You recall Jeremiah was called and God told him, “I claim you to be a prophet of the nations,” and he said, “Don’t call me. I’m just a boy, I can’t talk, and I can’t speak.” And the Lord God said to him, “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of

you, I'll put words in your mouth, and I will deliver you." God has delivered Jeremiah more times than any other prophet in the history of prophets of the Old Testament. He had more foiled assassination attempts on his life than any prophet. Yet Jeremiah stayed faithful to his call.

But Jesus was not reluctant at all. He was eager for his mission to be completed, and that's why he said, "I'm under stress until it's finished, until it's done. Therefore, the word I bring has effects on those who hear it." It's not just the content of his word, which we all know and believe is about peace and reconciliation and forgiveness and justice—all the values of the kingdom. What he's saying is that those who hear it are going to be judged. They have to make a decision. "As they decide, so they divide." That's why division becomes a part of his message because it's inevitable that if we listen to the truth of the word about the coming of His Kingdom, like those in the city of Jerusalem, like in the day of Jeremiah, they will resist it; ultimately, Jesus will pay the ultimate price of a new baptism that will offer an opportunity for his disciples to experience a new fire in their belly by the giving of his Spirit.

What difference does it make for us as disciple of Jesus?

I think it's true to say that all of us in some way play a Prophetic role in our families, in the workplace, in our schools, in our businesses, in our city, in government, and we know the best way we experience growth and to lead in the best interest of those we care about and love is by challenge more than comfort.

And I believe that speaking the truth to those who have power has always been a very difficult proposition. I'm not speaking about going up to see President Obama and telling him what's on our minds. I'm speaking about our own households, our own families, our own community, and our own networks. For the best interests of all and for our own fidelity to being bearers of this prophetic witness, we all have, in some way, accepted the challenge of expressing "tough love."

Parents have to exercise their leadership by giving tough love to their children for their own good. This occurs especially when they get themselves into messes, and we get them out by challenging them to a different way of living. Even a spouse

has to express tough love with another spouse about the way in which they conduct their lives. It could be substance abuse, money, relationships or any matter that causes concern and violates the relationship of their love.

You can think about our country in distress in this great recession. What about our political leaders having the gumption to be able to say to us, “We need to raise taxes in order to preserve future generations.” What about the need that we have for social programs to help the unfortunate who are foreclosed out of their homes and have lost their jobs? The list goes on. What about telling a peer that plagiarism on a school report you are working on jointly is unacceptable? Tough love. It plays out in families when we are willing to deal directly with the painful stuff rather than let it get covered up. You can’t speak of prophetic witness unless there is a willingness on your part to accept the costs. And I believe that’s what Jesus did in being faithful to his mission into Jerusalem, and clearly, Jeremiah was willing to do, being sunk down into the sticky, smelly mud of the cistern.

As we listen to this wonderful little reading from Hebrews, we are aware of the trust that it builds for those who suffer for fidelity to hard truths. We are running just behind Jesus in the long distance race of our lives. It is a wonderful image that the author to Hebrews brings before us, telling us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, that even though we’re challenged by our baptismal commitment to be witnesses of the Word of God in our lives, even though we at times feel overwhelmed and slip beneath the mud and slime, we must not grow despondent. The author says, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (Heb. 12:1–2). So I encourage you in the challenges of your life not to grow weary or to lose heart. In these days, these dog days of August, these are good words for us to hear.

*—Thanks to John Shea for his insights into the Gospel text from his work on the **Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers**, Cycle C, as well as the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman on Family Systems Therapy.*