

**“Let Them Turn To You.”**  
Sermon of the Rev. Dan Hatch,  
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24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 31, 2008

Scriptures: Jeremiah 15: 15-21; Matthew 16:24-26

Text: *“It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.”* Jeremiah 15: 19c

In our passage for today the prophet, Jeremiah is discouraged, and dangerously close to becoming as unfaithful as the Israelites to whom he is speaking. In the first part of Chapter 15, Jeremiah laments to God that he has been faithful in speaking God’s word, and he has made as many enemies as those who borrow or lend money! In a wonderful turn of phrase Jeremiah says, *“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and delight; ...”*

Jeremiah has been enjoying the words that God has put in his mouth, but he is about to suffer the same fate of the people to whom he is speaking by being led off into exile in Babylon.

The irony of his situation is not lost on Jeremiah, as his very name in Hebrew means “Yahweh exalts,” and yet it looks like it is the Babylonians who will exalt and lead them off into captivity. Jeremiah continues to vent his frustration, reminding God that he has been working hard on God’s behalf and not goofing off by sitting with the merrymakers, nor has he been filled with self-righteousness. Rather he has found himself sitting alone filled with indignation that his pain is increasing and he sees his woundedness as incurable. Jeremiah has reached the bottom and tells God that God is *“like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.”* In other words, Jeremiah had expected that speaking on God’s behalf would be refreshing, but instead finds only a dried up stream bed.

Have you ever felt down and discouraged when you have been trying hard to be faithful to God and doing God’s will to the best of your ability? Let us listen to what God had to say to Jeremiah in response to his lament. God makes four promises, the first two of which are conditional.

God’s first promise is that *if you turn back, I will take you back*. In other words if you repent, Jeremiah, and turn back to doing my will, I will welcome you back. If that sounds familiar, it should! Remember the baptism that John was offering in the Judean wilderness, the baptism Jesus sought out at the beginning of his ministry? It was, according to Mark 1:4, *a baptism of repentance* (I.e. turning again) *for the forgiveness of sins*. Sin is that which we say think or do, that separates us from doing God’s will. God is always there, like God was for Jeremiah, waiting for us to turn back to God. God has already made that promise, and God’s word is good and true, but we need to take the first step on our part and turn back to God whenever we get discouraged.

Indeed, this is the same conditional promise that Jesus made to his followers in today’s passage from Matthew 16: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves* (I.e. put their needs second) *take up their cross* (Their burden of being conveyors of the Gospel) *and follow me*. We like to think that following Jesus will bring only sweetness and light, but proclaiming the gospel, especially to those who wield earthly rather than divine power—power over others as

contrasted with empowering others—will always be a challenging, and sometimes a life-threatening activity. It is part of the package we can expect from obedience to God's word.

The second promise that God made to Jeremiah, is that *if you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth*. As people who are obedient to God's will, and followers of Christ Jesus, we are to proclaim God's truth—the nature of God unconditional love and forgiveness for those who are willing to turn, or return, to God and doing God's will. Our first audience when making such proclamations needs to be ourselves.

The next two promises that God makes to Jeremiah are not conditional. Rather they are statements about the truth of God's word. The first of these two is: *it is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them*. This statement reflects God's extravagant hospitality. We, through speaking and living God's word, do so **invitationally**. It is our responsibility as God's servants and mouthpieces to try and lead people to the Living Water, but we cannot make them drink. The thirst for the Living Water must come from within those who have been led to its shores.

That is why I have such a hard time with the “Great Commission” at the end of Matthew's gospel that is so popular among our evangelical brothers and sisters in Christ. Matthew 28:19 commands us to, *Go therefore and **make** disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...* We cannot **make** disciples. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. We can only invite them to become disciples through our words and actions, but it is they who must turn to us. We are not to compromise the Gospel with which we are entrusted by turning to the people and trying to **make** them disciples.

The second of God's unconditional promises to Jeremiah is this: *I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you, says the Lord. I will deliver you out to the hands of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless*. This is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 6:11 when he says “*Put on the full armor of God...*” Bronze was one of the strongest metals of Jeremiah's time. But the protection that God offers is not visible, nor is it burdensome or heavy, it is simply the armor of God's word, the truth of the Gospel which cannot be penetrated if one is secure in ones faith. It is the kind of armor that even enabled the saints to endure being burned at a stake, because it is not physical armor, but the spiritual armor of faith, than cannot be penetrated.

So as you go forth from here as a servant of God and disciple of Christ, remember that your task is *to let them turn to you*. Strengthen the armor of your faith and rely on God's promises to Jeremiah which are also promises to each and every one of us:

- *If you will turn back, I will take you back and you shall stand before me.*
- *If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth piece.*
- *It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.*
- *And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they will not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.*

These are the words of God. Let all the people say: Amen!