

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/22/2014, Pentecost 2
Jeremiah 20:7-13, Matthew 10:24-39
The Passionate Following of Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Zeal

There is a line in today's Psalm 69 that came to the mind of the disciples when, once upon a time, they looked on with wonder at Jesus with his whip. Jesus had just thrown the merchants and moneychangers out of the Temple. He drove them out with his whip of cords, overturned the moneychanger tables, and said to them:

Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. (John 2:17, KJV)

Then, the evangelist, St. John, refers to this morning's line from Psalm 69:

And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. (John 2:17, KJV)

Zeal for the Lord's house had eaten Jesus up. It had consumed him, filling his mind and his imagination with nothing but commitment to his heavenly Father. And in that zeal he had marched on and won the salvation of the world, for all who are willing.

My sermon this morning is about such zeal. If you should like a sermon title, I called it "The Passionate Following of Jesus." Sometimes sorrows and hardships come the way of the one who follows Jesus. If one wants calmness and tranquility, there is no guarantee that following Jesus will yield such peace. Indeed, Jesus himself warns his disciples that if they remain true to him, they might end up being called wicked and on the side of the devils:

If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.
(Matthew 10:25, RSV)

Imagine calling Jesus "Beelzebul," the "prince of the demons"! But, Jesus warns us that if we follow him as faithfully as we can, we might end up getting cursed too.

I wonder: Is there some case lying before you on your job in which you are quite convinced that the path of compassion and truth is to strive for such-and-such a thing, yet you anticipate troubles if you take that path? You know

something of the world and how it goes. You know that you will encounter opposition. People might say that you are being unreasonable and that you are threatening the peace and the smooth operation of things. You might even anticipate that you will be cursed.

A nurse, for example, might trouble an already stressed and overworked staff by insisting that a certain medical procedure be followed fully. The welfare of the patient is at risk. On the other hand, the medical procedure or the rules designed to keep away infection might be cumbersome. It could be argued that life is full of compromises and the strength of the medical staff is at low ebb, and it would make life easier to lie low on every dot and tittle of best practices.

I have sympathy for such dilemmas. I do not walk in the nurse's shoes and cannot safely decide such cases from afar. Some cases seem easier. If a policeman is tempted to steal a gun or money from a crook, I figure I can say, No, don't do that. But the drama of ordinary life is that in many cases, the application of the Ten Commandments to our job is complex and full of grey areas and involves questions of suffering or flourishing not only for ourselves but also for others. The one thing that is quite likely is that the one who raises questions – the one who is zealous and conscientious in Christian discipleship – is the one who is going to get grief. So if you desire only calmness and tranquility, then our Lord's call to take up our cross and follow him is going to be rough going.

I want to talk about passion in the Christian life — about being burning with some passion for Jesus, about being heartsick sometimes as you do your work and live your life, about laboring on in a way that sometimes seems so very fruitless, about self-doubts, and sleeplessness in the nighttime, and occasional exhilaration in the Lord. Let's begin with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah and Pashur

In today's story, the prophet Jeremiah is miserable. He has encountered opposition as he has proclaimed the Word of the Lord. An officer of the Temple — a fellow named Pashur — has arrested Jeremiah and punished him:

Then Pashur smote Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the LORD. (Jeremiah 20:2, KJV)

Why had Pashur done that? Why had Pashur smote Jeremiah and put him in the stocks? Well, the cause seems to have been that Pashur was a passionate fellow too. Jeremiah had done something that really offended Pashur, and the man was not one to quietly brood about it, nor try to calm himself down. Rather, he arrested Jeremiah and smote him.

In the previous chapter – Chapter 19 — we read of a dramatic prophecy of Jeremiah. The Lord had told him to get himself an earthenware jug, gather together the elders of the people together, and warn them that the Lord intended to

punish Judah for her idolatry and shedding of innocent blood. Then Jeremiah was to smash the earthenware jug:

¹⁰Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee, ¹¹And shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again: (Jeremiah 19:10-11, KJV)

For ancient people, this breaking of the earthenware jug was not mere symbolism, but more like the very commencing of the deed signified. When Jeremiah spoke those words in the name of the Lord and smashed that jug, the onlookers took him to thereby inaugurate the punishment of Judah.¹ They understood him to be setting the machinery of punishment in motion. The onlookers were probably appalled by what Jeremiah had done. And as for Pashur, he got mad at Jeremiah and smote him and threw him in the stocks.

So, that is the setting for Jeremiah's lament in this morning's First Lesson. He has been punished by Pashur and he is mad at the Lord for making him a prophet in the first place. In fact, Jeremiah is so upset about his fate that his complaints against the Lord are nigh blasphemous. And so we come to our text:

⁷O LORD, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed. (Jeremiah 20:7, RSV)

Here he complains that the Lord is driving him into a miserable ministry. He doesn't choose it for himself, but is driven to it by the Lord, who is stronger than he is and prevails over him. In a very moving passage, Jeremiah says that he would stop his ministry if he could, but he can't:

⁹If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

Indeed, a few verses beyond today's appointed Lesson, Jeremiah's lament reaches a depth that is hard to match in all the Bible or in any other literature, for Jeremiah comes to wish that he had not even been born:

¹ John Bright, *Jeremiah*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday & Company: Garden City, NJ, 1965), page 133.

¹⁴Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! ¹⁵Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, “A son is born to you,” making him very glad. ¹⁶Let that man be like the cities which the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, ¹⁷because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb for ever great. ¹⁸Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?
(Jeremiah 20:14-18, RSV)

There is something so expressive in Jeremiah, so passionate, and so ready to pile up the words and the laments that it could almost make one smile with admiration at his powers of language. One thing you can say about Jeremiah is that he is not lukewarm. You remember that word “lukewarm,” I bet. It comes from a famous passage in the last book of the Bible, from Revelation 3. In a red-letter Bible, these are the words of Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the one who “cometh with clouds and every eye shall see him” (Rev. 1:7-8). Our coming Lord says these mighty words to the Laodiceans:

¹⁵I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. ¹⁶So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.
(Revelation 3:15-16, KJV)

You can't say that about Jeremiah. You can't say that he is “neither cold nor hot.” The man is often hot. And that is what I want, in some measure, to stand up for.

Sloth

Theologian Rusty Reno argues that the besetting spiritual temptation for our age is sloth. Our own Rusty Reno has said this. Dr. Reno has preached right here at Immanuel's pulpit. He was longtime Professor at Creighton University, and now he is Editor for *First Things* magazine, which is a prestigious position here in America.

So, Rusty Reno argues that the dangerous spiritual temptation for our generation is sloth. In fact, he feels that we are so much in its grip that we cannot even feel it any more. By “sloth” he does not mean “lazy.” The good Lord knows that you folks are not lazy. I know about the long hours many of your work. You work with skill and talent and dedication day after long day, often until late at night, often on the weekends. You certainly are not lazy, yet Dr. Reno might be right that many of us suffer from sloth.

Let me speak with some broad strokes about education. Before there were universities in the world, there were monasteries. The education of monk involved repetition and memorization. The monk, for example, would pray the Psalms every day. As life went by, he would come to know the Psalms by heart. His mind and his heart and instincts of language would be formed by the Psalms and other sacred texts.

Universities brought a different method of education. Here, the emphasis was not so much on memorizing the text, but rather on *understanding* the text — to probe it, to understand its historical context, to relate it to other parts of settled learning. Philosophers and theologians, bishops and priests had always done such things. Now, in the universities, everyone was taught such disciplines.

But our age features a different emphasis. Our age is trained in what is called “critical distance.” We are trained to have a doubtful mind, to be skeptical, and to withhold ourselves from ideas and convictions. We look at the convictions of other ages, and we examine them, but we do not make them our own. We listen to the professor demolish Plato or Aristotle or St. Augustine, and we imagine ourselves to be done. We figure that all philosophies, all convictions, all faith in the end will be disproved. We have seen it before. Maybe we ourselves have gained some skill in tearing down the beliefs and passions of other people.

Likewise, we hear tell that our ancestors here in America were patriotic, that they loved parades on the Fourth of July, that when civilization seemed at stake because of Hitler, they could imagine heading off to war and dying if need be. We hear about patriotism like that, and are good at critiquing it and pointing out its dangers, but are we capable of patriotism any more? Are we capable of launching our lives without restraint into any distinctive manner of life?

Sloth is a kind of spiritual sadness, a languor of soul, a lethargy of striving, a coolness of commitment. It is polite dispassion. It sits quietly on the side and criticizes, but does not fling itself wholeheartedly and without reservation into big causes. It assumes that nothing is worth committing to because in the end, everything will be disproved by clever critics.

Well, Jeremiah was not slothful. For that matter, neither was Pashur who smote Jeremiah and threw him in the stocks. And for that matter, neither was Jesus. How could a man who trembled before a cup he was ready to drink – who trembled with such fear that sweat fell from him “like great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44) – how could such a One be lukewarm in his faith?

The call of Christ

When Jesus says “take up your cross and follow me,” he does not mean for us to search around for some cross and take it up. No. Follow him with all your heart, and you will find your cross sure enough.

Likewise, when Jesus says take up your cross and follow me, he does not mean that we should seek such things as opposition, disappointments, or self-doubts. There is no need to search for such things. A whole wild world of emotions will

come on their own, according to God's wisdom, if we are following Jesus with all of our hearts and flinging ourselves into his manner of life.

In last Sunday's text from Matthew 28, the Great Commission, Jesus gave an important promise to his disciples. He launched them on their mission to conquer the world, bringing souls to him everywhere on this globe. Then, he promises to be with his disciples in their mission work:

...and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.
(Matthew 28:20, RSV)

Now, in today's readings we are reminded that to have Jesus with us "always, to the close of the age," does not guarantee that the work of a Christian will be easy. He never promised us a peaceful path. He never promised that we would escape great swings of emotion, from high hopes and gratitude to near despair and self-doubt.

In a way, the one thing we *are* promised is that life with Christ will not be boring. It will not be a dispassionate thing, nor a lukewarm thing, but is best lived with gusto.

So, there will ebbs and flows of emotion in our Christian life — plenty of ebbs and flows. But for all that, our Lord would have us bear in mind one good thing: the truth will win out. Have no fear of that. Have no fear that your labors will be in vain and that your sorrows will have no final answer. Have no fear that if there is some tiny speck of truth in what you are trying to do, that that speck will be lost:

²⁶So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Matthew 10:26, RSV)

Let us, then, lose ourselves in Christ. Let us try even more earnestly to so conform ourselves to him, suffering whatever blows should come our way, and weathering whatever passions should sweep over us, that we will both die with him and reign with him. It is as Jesus says in the great conclusion to today's Gospel Lesson:

³⁸...he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:38-39, RSV)

Maybe we so dedicate ourselves to Christ that we find our life in him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.