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Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 4:16-30
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“The Disturbing Word of God”

All of us are familiar with the children’s story, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in which a very foolish emperor pays a couple of rogues a large sum of money to make the finest clothes in the land. According to the rogues, these clothes are made from such wonderful material that they are invisible to all who are stupid or unfit for their work. When the clothes are made, the emperor cannot see them. Instead of telling the truth, he comments on their exquisite beauty. One by one, the members of court admire the clothes. Finally, when the emperor parades through the town, the people, not wanting to appear stupid, call out their approval of the Emperor’s new clothes. No one dares to tell the truth until one small boy cries out, “The Emperor has no clothes!” To the dismay of the Emperor, his words are repeated throughout the town, “The Emperor has no clothes!” The words spoken by a small boy expose the foolish vanity of the Emperor and his court.

There are moments which cry out for an honest and, sometimes, disturbing word to be spoken. God calls Jeremiah to proclaim a disturbing word that is four parts judgment and two parts grace. Before he can speak of the ways God will rebuild and replant the people, he has to speak of how God will pluck up, pull down, destroy and overthrow the people. His words are unpopular with the rulers of Israel. The words fall heavily upon the ears of the people. Jeremiah is not someone you want to have around. He is as welcome as a downpour at a summer picnic. He meddles in the affairs of people who like to run things their own way. Jeremiah is scorned, abused, arrested, imprisoned and threatened with death. At best he is the laughingstock of the city; at worst he is a dangerous enemy of the people in power.

Jeremiah never asked to be a prophet. He is angry that God has given him a disturbing word to speak. In his pain, Jeremiah cries out to God and curses his situation. All that being a prophet has done for him is to make his life miserable. Rejected by his family and friends and despised by his enemies, Jeremiah wishes he were dead. To Jeremiah, God is a deceiver who has seduced him and taken advantage of him by force.

When Jeremiah is silent and refuses to speak, the word of God consumes his heart like a fire. The word fights within him to be free. To speak is to meet rejection; to keep silent is to know real agony of mind and heart. Yet, Jeremiah is faithful to the word.

To speak the truth is costly! In Shakespeare’s tragedy, “King Lear,” the old king is ready to give up his throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. In order to determine the division of the land, he asks his daughters to tell him which one loves him most. The two eldest girls, Goneril and Regan, flatter King Lear with lavish words of love.

His youngest child, Cordelia, says that she has nothing to say. He urges her to mend her speech. Disgusted by the false words of her sisters, Cordelia tell her father that she loves him as a daughter should - no more, no less. Lear is outraged by Cordelia’s plain words.

He says that truth shall be her only dowry and he gives her part of the kingdom to her sisters. From his foolish reaction to her simple word of truth, the tragedy of the play unfolds.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus learns the consequence of being faithful to the word of God. From the very first of his gospel, Luke is eager that Jesus be known as the long-awaited Messiah. Right after the temptation of Jesus by the devil, Jesus goes to his home town and preaches his first sermon. In one sense, the people who know you and love you are the best audience. When they hear Jesus read the scroll about the salvation the Messiah will bring, they are proud of the way he reads and the things he says. Everyone likes hearing about the good things God is doing: bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, giving sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. Can’t you see the headlines of the first edition of The Nazareth News, “Local Boy Makes Good.”

Then their pride turns into anger. In some ways, a hometown audience is the worst audience because they think they know what you will say. They know that the message you bring will not be anything outside of what they have always known and heard. What makes the people angriest is that Jesus talks about the words of Isaiah being fulfilled - not among the Jews, but among the Gentiles. Jesus says that God is doing good things; however, God is not doing them here but beyond the family of faith, among foreigners and even the enemies. They want him to do the same things in his home town that he did in Capernaum, but he cannot. The reason he cannot do the work of God among them is that they are not open to the new thing that God is doing. Strangers, gentiles and surprising people are open to the healing and saving work of God. Surprising people are responding to Jesus' ministry...like the foreign widow whom Elijah fed and the foreign General Naaman whom Elisha healed. People of faith, no matter who they are, are seeing the words of Isaiah brought to fulfillment. The grace of God knows no bounds.

The disturbing word of the breadth, depth and height of God's grace enrages the good religious folk of Capernaum. They are comforted by their conviction that God's grace belongs to Israel alone. They are troubled by the idea that God's grace shatters divisions, overcomes boundaries and upsets the established religious and political order. The people in the synagogue rise up as one and try to throw him off a cliff.

The second edition of *The Nazareth News* reads: "Local Boy's Blasphemy Incites Riot." The pet kitten that purrs softly becomes the wild tiger with a dangerous growl.

Albert Curry Winn wrote in his book, "A Sense of Mission," "What distinguishes the church from the world, from all other groupings of institutions...is primarily...its mission. As Jesus is unique because God sent him into the world, so the church is unique because Christ sends it into the world." (p.44) God has entrusted to us this disturbing word that shatters human pride and breaks human oppression, exposes sin and forgives the sinner and heals the broken and lifts the lowly. As Jeremiah discovered, God's redemptive word may first break us before it makes us whole and judge us before it sets us free.

Debby Applegate's biography of Henry Ward Beecher, the first pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, is entitled, "The Most Famous Man in America."

As the son of Lyman Beecher, Henry was a part of a famous dynasty of Calvinist preachers. In the 1830's, the family moved west from New England to Ohio to bring the Calvinist doctrine to the frontier. Soon, they became embroiled in the Old School/New School controversy raging in the Presbyterian Church. Old School Presbyterianism represented the more traditional scholastic Calvinism; New School Presbyterianism was more evangelical and tended to support the abolition of slavery. In 1837, Henry Ward Beecher became the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Lawrenceburg, Indiana, where he had to overcome his jealousy over the success of other Methodist and Baptist pastors and the meager results of his own labors.

Two years later, in 1839, he became the first pastor of our congregation, the newly-formed New School Second Presbyterian Church.

Here in Indianapolis, he had to struggle with his pride in his developing reputation as an orator and a public figure. In a time of doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversy, he resolved to avoid debating those issues and doctrines that divided Christians and focus on those things that promoted Christian love among God's people. In his diary, Beecher wrote, "I will strive to cherish secret feelings of love to all other Churches beside my own... and give my life to bring all Christians to work the true power of Gospels - the love of Christ."

(p.166) Although Beecher never completely overcame either his jealousy or his pride, he knew the gospel demanded something better from us than spending our precious resources of time and energy fighting narrow partisan wars.

A faithful church places itself under the word of God. The word disturbs our complacency about the way things are. Jeremiah comes to understand that God has to do some demolition work before God can build a new community and God has to plow the ground before new seeds will grow.

Sometimes, the first walls that need to come down are the walls we have built around ourselves and the first field

that needs to be plowed is the fallow soil of our own hearts. For too long, the larger Presbyterian Church has spent its time and energy debating issues of sexuality, ordination and power. Some issues will not be resolved; some issues are not ready to be resolved. Like Henry Ward Beecher, we need to confess our divisive tendencies, our suspicion of the motives of others, our insistence that our own point of view prevail and proclaim the breadth, depth and height of God's love for all people.

Jesus knows that not everyone is happy when God brings life to the enemy and feeds the hungry stranger. What narrow ideas, prejudicial notions and dangerous pride do we need to put to death in our own hearts and minds to be open to see the redemptive work of God? Like that foolish emperor in the children's story, we need to see our own nakedness so that we may be fully clothed in Christ. I can look back over my ministry and see times when I have let my fear of the unknown or my fear of losing control get in the way of supporting the creative and life-giving work of God. God is always doing bigger things than my mind can conceive. The disturbing word of God calls us to be accountable for our own sin; then the word sets us free to proclaim the liberating power of God in the world. Last summer, we discovered a new spirit of cooperation and partnership when we joined with other Christians, Muslims and Jews in constructing the first House of Abraham for Habitat for Humanity. We overcame our fear of the stranger and our reluctance to work with people of other faiths. Together, we came closer to the vision of God.

God's word is written upon our hearts. Listen to the Spirit speak through your heart so that you may know the word to speak. This disturbing word demands our lives and our faithful witness. To speak the word is costly; to keep silent is deadly. The word of God will break your heart before it makes your heart. May the Lord grant us the courage first to hear and then to speak the disturbing word of God.

