September 19, 2004 Season after Pentecost David L. Edwards

Prophetic Life: Compassion

Jeremiah 8:18-9:2

O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

The passage from Jeremiah seems not to have any good news in it! Jeremiah is pouring out his spiritual suffering because of what is happening all around him and within him. And yet this passage, because of its very anguish, is worth our attention. Jeremiah is a prophet of God. A prophet in the biblical meaning is not a predictor of the future or merely a doomsayer. A prophet is one who hears God's living word for a given time and circumstance and is called to speak and live that word for the sake of the world. We are called to be a prophetic people who can listen for and then speak and live God's truth in our day and time. But the prophetic role cannot be lightly taken. It means perceiving the deeper realities of what is going on in and around us. Seeing the truth will often be unpleasant and fearful.

So, first of all the prophet sees the truth of the situation. For Jeremiah it is the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the abduction of his people into exile in Babylon. It is a reality that cannot be denied or avoided. But Jeremiah sees more deeply into what this is saying to the people. The destruction of their society and livelihoods is related to the injustice and empty religion that has pervaded Israel. Jeremiah was called by God to speak against comfortable religion and the injustices of society. In his "temple sermon" (Ch. 7) he railed against those who promoted a religion of comfort while inflicting suffering on the poor and the vulnerable. Now Jeremiah's words are coming true, but he isn't happy about it. He is heartsick. A true prophet doesn't say, "I told you so."

We don't like to face difficult or painful realities, as societies or as individuals. It makes us uncomfortable. We prefer rosy pictures even if they are false. And yet rosy pictures do not help us become whole or healthy. If there is something wrong, as difficult as it may be to face, we need to know about it so that we can understand and do something about it. Prophetic spirituality understands that facing what is wrong is the first step toward healing. For that reason the work of the prophet is not appreciated or welcomed. To raise questions that challenge others to face difficult realities causes discomfort. To say uncomfortable things means putting

ourselves on the line emotionally and risking tensions and resistance, even rejection. The prophet's aim, however, is not to cause trouble or to be difficult. The aim is always to perceive and understand more deeply the truth of God in any situation so that healing might come about.

The prophet life is more than just truth telling, however. The prophet moves to the experience and the life of compassion. Jeremiah wasn't going around telling people off, letting the chips fall where they may and feeling righteous about it. He wasn't some TV. evangelist smugly pointing fingers at those judged to be immorally or politically wrong. This, too, is part of Jeremiah's grief and pain. His suffering is also related to the suffering of his people. He doesn't dissociate himself from them but identifies with them. He doesn't put himself on the "right" side while dismissing those who are on the "wrong" side.

Jeremiah not only sees the disaster of people's unfaithfulness but also their suffering. He knows they must take responsibility for and face the consequences of their actions. But he doesn't write them off. "My poor people" he continually calls them. He knows their spiritual emptiness and crisis. He knows the cries from their hearts as they begin to realize that they are spiritually lost. "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her? The harvest is over, the summer is ended, and still life hasn't gotten better. We are not saved." Jeremiah takes up their cry as his own as he asks if there is no balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul, as the old song goes. Is there no doctor with a cure? Where is God and why hasn't God relieved our suffering?

Jeremiah allows compassion to fill his heart. He doesn't say to God, "Look, these are <u>your</u> people. You do something about it. I've had it with them." They are "his people." And he doesn't distinguish between those who suffer because of injustice and those who suffer because they are unjust, those who are being spiritually fleeced by their leaders and those who are so lost they are doing the fleecing. It isn't enough to rail against those who are perpetrating injustice, war, and inequality in our society or the world. As a prophetic people, we are supposed to see and condemn those things. But we are called to something deeper, more serious—to see deeply into the whole situation and feel compassion for all who are part of it.

During the French Indochina and Vietnam Wars, Thich Nhat Hahn was a young Buddhist monk and teacher who worked with other Buddhists to relieve suffering on both sides. The poor of the country who were being violated and the French and U.S. soldiers sent to a strange, faraway country, filled with fear and ignorance. Because they refused to take sides but to work to relieve all suffering, the monks were hated and killed by both sides. Nhat Hanh knew that there was no other way to achieve true

peace than through this kind of deeper understanding and a compassion that placed him and his fellow workers with all who suffered.

If we can cultivate that kind of compassion, then we become true peacemakers. It means seeing more deeply and finding all the ways we can to be with "our poor people," with all people, in truth and compassion.

Being prophetic people also means <u>resisting the temptation to</u> <u>escape</u>. The last verse of our reading is important: "O that I had in the desert a traveler's lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them!" How honest! Isn't there a little cabin in the mountains I can get to and leave all this awful stuff?! The desire just to give up and escape. It is good news, I think, that Jeremiah is so brutally honest about his feelings. Wouldn't we rather just give up on it all and retreat to our small, comfortable lives where we won't be disturbed by what we see going on? Where we won't have to go to the trouble and struggle of being compassionate people? Where we can just sit back and lob our great ideas and solutions at the world without sharing the suffering?

Jeremiah understood that there is no escape from life and its painful realities. The only way is to embrace it all, everything that comes to us, and to develop our compassion more deeply. Far from taking off for that little desert hideaway, Jeremiah made a decision. He chose to stay in Jerusalem with the people, to go through with them what they had to go through. He chose to stay and help rebuild. From that point Jeremiah's message moved from judgment to hope. Being prophetic means you know when to say the right word, when to speak the hard words of reality and when to speak the soft words of encouragement. In seminary language, there must be the pastoral as well as the prophetic ministry.

I think here of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's decision in June 1939 to leave the safety of the U.S., where he was studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York, to return to Germany. He knew what was coming and he knew also that, in his words, "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." (Eberhard Bethge, <u>Dietrich</u> Bonhoeffer, p. 559.)

Being prophetic people means being compassionate people, willing to understand that difficulties must be faced and born by oneself as well as by others. This is true also for our personal lives. Just as we are to be compassionate toward others, so we to be compassionate toward ourselves as we embrace those difficult things in our lives. Not to try and escape them. Not to pretend they are not there. But to deal gently and lovingly with ourselves so that we may go through what we must go through. Only this way can we ready ourselves for the new life that can come.

And this is the last point: To be prophetic means that we prepare ourselves through honesty, deeper understanding and compassion, to receive the new movements of God's spirit. It is a spiritual paradox that we must learn how to become empty, how to embrace those things we don't want to embrace, so that we can then be filled with what God wants to give us. If we are going to be prophetic people then we need to do the difficult spiritual work it involves. There are no shortcuts. Whether the painful realities are political, religious, social or personal, we must embrace them and feel the pain of them. When we stop trying to avoid or deny, then we can become inwardly calm and peaceful enough to see more deeply into those difficult experiences and understand them. In this way, we exercise compassion toward others and ourselves. Not condemning. Not rejecting. But accepting and being with all who suffer and our own suffering.

We cannot do this if we are not on that inward journey, doing the daily work of prayer, cultivating silence, study, and reflection. Here is the only place I differ a bit with Jeremiah. I think there <u>is</u> a little desert place in which we must take refuge. It is the solitude in which we can come to deeper insight, where we can identify and embrace our suffering and that of others with compassion, where we can listen more and more deeply. This is not escape or denial. It is the kind of retreat that keeps us from bolting the situation altogether and getting lost in the wilderness.

I hope that you hear good news in these anguished words of Jeremiah. The importance of facing and embracing the difficult and painful experiences of life. The compassion that we can have toward others and ourselves. The wisdom of not escaping these things but using them to prepare ourselves for the new, for the healing that God will bring. We see this all in Jesus and the way he calls us to follow him. His perceiving and naming of the things that were wrong and causing suffering. His compassionate solidarity with both those who suffered injustice and those who perpetrated it, with the poor and the rich. His identification with suffering as he went through rejection and even death because of those who would not face the truth about themselves. But in it all, his remaining rooted in God, trusting that God would bring new life.