

Proper 7, Year A

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

I will with God's Help Sunday

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Is anybody else wondering if the lectionary planners were having a bad day when they came up with the scripture selections of late? I mean a few weeks ago, we had the glorious Pentecost story. Then we had the great commission on Trinity Sunday.

But discipleship started to get real last week, as we discussed its real consequences. And I think we should call today: "Don't Kid Yourself" Sunday.

Our reading from Jeremiah has the prophet saying "You enticed me oh Lord, and I let myself be enticed." Ice cream Sundaes are enticing. Romantic dinners are enticing. This isn't what Jeremiah is describing.

The version I grew up with has Jeremiah saying "You duped me, Lord, and I let myself by duped." You fooled me into getting involved, God. Or worse yet you seduced me, and then took advantage of me. And now I'm in over my head.

Now to be honest, Jeremiah the prophet does seem to have anger management problems and trouble with authority. He is often imprisoned for the challenging things God puts in his mouth, which is the case in today's Scripture. And today he's had it with God.

But it's not just Jeremiah this Sunday. The psalmist says: Surely, for your sake have I suffered reproach, and shame has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my own kindred, an alien to my mother's children.

And Jesus in Matthew's Gospel isn't any help -- "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

And I've got to say I was hoping for something a little more soothing today. But the news cycle and the gospel do not necessarily take a summer break. So we sat on the edge of our seats this past week as we wondered what became of the five people lost in the submersible that was touring the Titanic wreckage. And we may have been less aware that 300 migrants were drowned off the coast of Greece after their boat, which carried 750 people, capsized. Both those voyages were insanely risky. One was a luxury expedition, the other a flight from poverty and famine.

Jeremiah would have had something to say about which lives got the most scrutiny, and I'm sure that his prophetic voice would again be called upon to shout against "violence and destruction" no matter where he were to look in our social media.

On this Sunday after the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth -- when enslaved people in Texas got the delayed news that they had been freed -- perhaps we need to call today "Tell it like it is Sunday."

Neither Jeremiah, nor the psalmist, nor Jesus put any sugar coating on the consequences of being God's voice, or Jesus' hands and feet in the world. They are not advertising execs. They are truth tellers. And God's people don't get a pass from the consequences of our free-range humanity.

We get a ticket right into the middle of the mess, with the commission to bring with us only God's Good News.

That Good News takes the shape of the love that we carry with us into the streets. That Good News is measured by our willingness to stand with people who are in agony. The Good News is proclaimed in the act of creating just and merciful communities. That Good News is the announcement that God never leaves the struggle, and we go where God goes.

And sometimes that Good News feels like a fire in the bones. And sometimes it feels like holding on by the thinnest thread. So before we declare this "pack up and find another religion Sunday" I want to talk about how the follower of Jesus is particularly equipped for these times. - what we can do not only to endure them, but to embrace them as part of our great commission.

In this passage from Matthew's gospel, Jesus uses the categories that were the mark of life-and-death privilege in his time – The Roman power structure based on the family.

A man would be under the authority of his father, a daughter under her mother, a daughter-in-law under her mother-in-law; underneath all of those would be servants and slaves – where Israel often found itself. In the Roman world one's foes will be members of one's own household. It looked a lot like an episode of Succession.

So disrupt those power structures in the name of the gospel of Jesus, in the name of love over familial power, and you will have conflict in the family.

Jesus reminds his followers in the starkest terms that the secret to finding new life in the times they are in, requires **losing** the old one. Because what you are willing to die to is directly related to how you are willing to live as a follower of Christ.

That life in Christ that we are being challenged to seek in Matthew's Gospel today is not just the life that happens after the body dies. It's the life that happens after our self-centeredness dies, after our attachments die, after our privileges and prejudices die. After those things die, we live differently, because of what Jesus offers in return. That's the life we're challenged to find by taking up the cross and following him.

In that new life, when you have let go of everything else but Christ, you have nothing to lose.

That's how a Christian lives in times like these.

A few years ago I was in a meeting with several clergy who had been tasked by the bishop to figure out how to strengthen the anti-racist practice in our diocese. An African American priest in the group asked us White clergy directly if we were really willing to face the consequences of speaking boldly about racial justice in a church that has a mixed record on defense of Black lives over the last 400 years.

Oh yes! We quickly insisted. Of course! How could we not?

But he persisted.

Even if you lose members? Even if your parish finances take a hit? Even if your parishioners send your sermons to right-wing groups and they find out where you live? Even if your family members are threatened? Even then?

This is the question that the Spirit is really putting to the church today. I know rectors who have experienced each one of those responses. Our own bishop has been called a dirty Mexican to his face by people in the pews.

And so my colleague was right to ask us if we were willing to face the true consequences of representing the Gospel in our community.

It's not a unique question. It is the question of Baptismal promise and Eucharistic offering. In fact, there is not one sacrament where we are not asked to leave an old life for a new one.

The ongoing cry for racial justice puts this in particular relief. That same Black priest who challenged us White clergy, also made it clear to us what the risk is like for him and his siblings of color -- that on any given day, Black and Brown people have no guarantee that they will not lose their lives, he said. Driving with a headlight out, reaching for a wallet, making a purchase, going birdwatching, going jogging, walking down the sidewalk, having an emotional crisis in the presence of authorities – all are occasions that have been met with deadly force against Black and Brown bodies.

So when I'm asked what consequences am I willing to experience as a result of working for racial justice, I have to ask myself how much of my old life as a White person am I willing to lay down?

If the answer is all of it, then I have to tell you right now that I can't do that alone.

I need help. And here is what I'm relying on.

I am relying on you and your faith and your energy and your commitment to the new world God is bringing forth – and how you pray it and find it in Scriptures, and how you post it on Facebook. I need that because as a member of the body of Christ, much of my faith and energy and hope is stored in you. So we need to hold that for one another.

I am relying on the healing and nourishment found in prayer and worship, whether I pray it in-person with this community, or tune in on the livestream. If you need that too then let today's act of worship enter you like food and drink, realize that the soul inside of you is made thirsty by all that is required at this time. Sip it slowly. Savor it through the day. Greet it with all the gratitude you can muster. Another word for thanksgiving is Eucharist – bread or no bread.

And I rely on the God who beckons me into the work and who asks me to lay down all the things that get in the way of God's Kingdom.

So maybe this should be called "I will with God's help" Sunday.

Amen.