



Nine Days of Grace: Novena 2018

Jeremiah 7:23-28

Luke 11:14-23

When Victoria, Trung, Andrea, and I first sat down to talk about themes for the Novena, we talked about what's going on in our world today and the mood in our country, and how these signs of the times would shape our preaching.

So many people are finding this a dark and difficult time. The old political maps we have used for years can leave us lost and disoriented in our chaotic, polarized political landscape. We go looking for a civil dialogue and end up at a barroom brawl. The values many of us hold dear seem tossed in the trash – not even the recycling bin, and forget composting! Probably for most of us here at this gathering, it's discouraging, but we know that for others, outside this chapel/church, these are times of real fear and struggle.

Immigrants, and especially immigrants without documents are being made the scapegoat for all of America's fears about the times we live, fears about the changes going on in our culture, our nation, our world. Here in Western Washington they are being picked up for detention and deportation. Young immigrants, the Dreamers, are being used as a political bargaining chip, but they are real people, our neighbors, with family, relationships, and so much promise in their future.

Another mass shooting at a school leaves us upset, troubled. Racist words and actions are increasingly visible and aggressive. Almost every day, the *Seattle Times*, or what's left of it, tells the story of those living in tents or trucks far from the river of wealth that overflows through greater Seattle's high-rises.

So, yes, this is definitely a good time to go see a movie like *the Post* (about the importance of courageous investigative journalism) or *Black Panther* (opening us up to the heroes we could imagine), or *Loving* (to remember those who fought against race discrimination). It's also just the right time to hear Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah begins his ministry in Jerusalem in a time and setting that has haunting echoes of our own. He came of age in the waning years of a well-regarded king who seemed to be doing everything right, and who upheld the faithfulness to God's law – the values the people believed in deeply.

But then this king was gone, and another king came to throne; more impulsive and filled with worldly ambition. He and his court proclaimed that God would bless and protect their nation, but they ignored the God's law – as Jeremiah bemoans in today's reading. The rich got richer and dabbled in idolatry. The king didn't have much of a foreign policy beyond vague promises of making the Jerusalem great again. Meanwhile, the nations around them rose in power, and Judah's situation seemed to head south.

Into this gloomy scene comes Jeremiah to call them back to faithfulness to God. And what I think is powerful for us to hear today is that Jeremiah speaks to them **not just as individuals, but he speaks to them as a people** – God’s people. Jeremiah names not just where they have ignored God’s word in their individual actions and decisions – that is part of it, but only part of it. Jeremiah also names how they as a people have ignored God’s word in their laws, in their economy, in their culture. It wasn’t just that some of them chose to worship other gods; they built temples to other gods and the people’s calendar honored other gods. It wasn’t just that some of ignored poor people, they used their legal system to take poor peoples’ land away. And they used their national fears as an excuse to expel the foreigners from among them. Their sin in Judah - some might focus on their failure to obey, I would point to their refusal to listen – was not only personal, it was social. **“This is a nation that does not listen.”**

Social sins are made up of individual actions, but together they create a climate, social conventions, values, laws, **a system that keeps people from doing the right thing, and gives them ready justification and even rewards them for doing the wrong thing.** Many of you here are women. You don’t need me to tell you social sin, since you’ve lived with inequity and inequality for... ever. And some of you here are people of color. You don’t need me to tell you about social sin. I need you to tell me about social sin and how it has worked against you.

You may know, or won’t be surprised to find out, that Jeremiah was NOT popular – he was not a frequent guest on the talk shows of ancient Judah. Palace press secretaries demonized him, tried to discredit him, and the rulers eventually chased him out of the country. He fled for his life to Egypt – foreshadowing the life of Jesus centuries later.

But Jeremiah wouldn’t stop speaking up and speaking out. He wouldn’t stop listening to his call from God to speak of faithfulness to God’s law. He knew that speaking the truth was the only way to expose social sin, bring it into the light of day, and begin to break its power. **Silence only lets unjust social systems get away with murder.**

Today is International Women’s Day. In many, many countries, this is the day women celebrate the achievements made in equality and equity. We have seen how **#me too movement** has helped countless women to find their voice, speak up, and name their experience as victims of the social sin of sexual harassment, abuse, exploitation, the inequity that makes that possible.

The high school student survivors of Parkland. Florida, have spoken out about the truth of their horrible experience, and are leading students around the country in naming the social systems that have kept us as a nation from any serious action on gun safety. And it’s not just all about one organization, one state, or one president. To pin it all on one opponent gives us an escape from seeing the systemic sin in which we collude.

These examples bring us to this reading from Luke's Gospel, with its language about demons and Beelzebub. The demon that possesses this person in this passage keeps him mute, and when Jesus casts out the demon, he finds his voice and begins to speak.

What demons keep us silent? We know what the social sins of our society are. What possesses us to stay silent when our neighbors get picked up because they don't have documents or when we see a city full of construction cranes building everything except low-income housing?

Those who wanted to test Jesus asked him for a sign from heaven, but **we don't need another sign from heaven.** Like the people of his day, like the people of ancient Judah, God sent all those prophets to us too, and keeps sending them. **We know what to say.**

Maybe the demon we need expelled is our own fear – legitimate fear – of speaking up, of getting fired, getting sidelined, getting a reputation. But, looking around the chapel/church, I'm guessing we're not living with a fear of getting deported, or evicted or beaten. It's not to say that our fears aren't real; it's to say that our fears are demons that grace can overcome, if we ask for that grace.

Maybe the demon is dread of the uncomfortable and unknown landscape of naming the white privilege that I carry like a latent but determining gene, or just admitting to **not knowing how** to unlearn racism and where that's going to take me. That demon is just as powerful as fear, and so is the grace available to expel it.

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel that if grace drives out our fears, and we are freed to speak up, to repent and seek reconciliation for the social sins that we swim in, to ask God to lead us away from them and toward more faithful words and actions, then we are seeing the Kingdom of God come upon us. And more importantly, those folks who fear deportation, eviction, and harassment, who have endured centuries of discrimination, they will see us joining them in seeking the Kingdom. They are asking us to pray for the grace to expel the demons that silence us.

So, this week, as we share these Nine Days of Grace together, as Trung, Victoria and I and others humbly share the privilege of praying with you individually and together, I urge you to ask God not only for the graces you know you need, but for the grace in you that others need – the grace for each of us to overcome the demons which keep us silent, and with that grace to find ourselves free to speak up for the Kingdom of God.

Joe Hastings

Day 2 | Thursday, March 8, 2018