

HOPE IN TIMES OF DARKNESS

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Jeremiah 31:27-34

Luke 18:1-8

Our passage from Jeremiah is one that contains several surprises not the least of which is a message of great hope and forgiveness. Written in the midst of the Babylonian Captivity when the future of Israel seems the darkest, Jeremiah brings some new light and hope. In what seems like a very dark time in our world maybe our friend Jeremiah brings that light into our darkness.

This passage contains the promise of a new covenant that is different from the one with Moses. There are two types of covenants in the bible. Many are what are called Sinai covenants after the mountain where Moses received the 10 commandments. This is a covenant that is a two sided agreement. If I do X you will do Y in return. In the case of a relationship with God, if we follow his commandments, then we are going to be rewarded. Fail to follow them and we will be punished. This is a quid pro quo relationship and up until this point that is how most of the covenants worked.

This new covenant goes beyond rules and regulations. This goes beyond even the Shema where God decrees that they shall teach these commandments to their children, write them on their doorposts, on their forehead. All of these require action on our part and God's response is conditioned on what we do, not what God wants to do.

In addition all of these are external actions, Jeremiah's covenant is internal. One commentary used the phrase Covenant of internalized integrity. This is a covenant that is not just talked about, this is a covenant that is lived, that comes from the core of our being. This is a covenant that is based on relationships and most of all love.

This is also a covenant that is centered on the concept of grace not merit and this is an enormous shift in theology. This is a real change of theology because it is all God and Grace centered. We are recipients more than participants. Of course Grace is something that God always offers, whether we choose to accept Grace is up to us.

So at this low point in the history of Israel Jeremiah promises that God is right there for the people. Even though they have disobeyed God's commandments God has not in fact abandoned them. Their actions have consequences and they are certainly suffering those, but Jeremiah changes everything in this passage.

Ignatius would certainly understand the way the Israelites felt at this moment in history and how we may feel today. Ignatius teaches to idea of consolation and desolation. Consolation is usually the good times and God seems near. Desolation is when God seems distant just as God must have seemed to the people of Jeremiah's time and may seem to us today. Yet Ignatius teaches that in this moment of desolation is exactly the time when God is closest and we need to be open to God.

This is where the opening of our gospel, which is the parable of the unjust judge applies. The first words are "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Prayer is the response that God desires in times of crisis. Action at some point, but prayer first, middle and last!

Ignatius would say that when we feel that distance that desolation as he calls it that is precisely the time that we need to turn to prayer. In reality there is never a bad time for prayer and that is why Jesus calls on us to pray continuously, but how in the world do we do that?

So my challenge to you is not to pray all the time, but to begin by finding 5 times a day to say a quick prayer. Now many will say, I do not have time to do that. Well Jews are expected to pray three times a day and Moslems are expected to take time to pray 5 times a day, so this is not impossible. Millions if not billions of people do this everyday. This is a challenge because we get caught up the hustle and bustle of our day. However it is possible if we learn to pray in the cracks. Margaret Gunther during a retreat for our class at seminary warned us about how hard it is for priests to keep an active prayer life. She warned us that it was very easy to let the day go by and not pray.

My personal practice is to set aside the first 45 minutes of the day to be in conference with the boss as I refer to it. Many would like to do that and some days it does not happen even for me. So that is when I pray in the cracks. It works something like this.

This jar is filled with rice. The rice represents all the things that we do in a day. Now I have 5 stones here. These represent the 5 prayers I want you to try. Now if I try to pile the stones on top of the rice, the lid will not go on. So let's try something else. (Hand out the 5 stones to 5 people in the congregation. Pour the rice out of the jar into another container.) Now notice I will put a little rice in the jar and then add one stone. That can be a prayer in the morning. Then I add more rice. Now put another stone in here. Maybe that's a quick prayer before a meeting. Now more rice. The third stone, maybe that's simply saying grace at lunch. Now more rice. Add the fourth stone, maybe that's a prayer said at a stop light on the way home from work or the store. Maybe it is a prayer said sitting in the traffic jam we call the Hampton road bridge tunnel! Now more rice. Finally the 5th stone, a prayer of thanks to God for the day that is past. Maybe a short

examination of how God has worked in your day. Now the rest of the rice and see, the lid still fits!

If you put the prayer on top of your busy schedule it does not fit, but if you integrate prayer into your day, then you will have more than enough time. This is the essence for me of praying always. To do that we need to pray in all ways as well.

So take a few minutes and think about the cracks in your day, when you can say a prayer. Share that with someone sitting near you. (allow a minute or so). Now what are the cracks that you have indentified? Would anyone be willing to share.

Examples of praying in the cracks from the services.

Stuck as a stop light

Before walking into a room for a meeting or to visit someone.

Waiting for a child to finish at a sporting event or music lesson.

While walking

Instead of going to Facebook, stop and pray.

Grace at meals. All meals not just dinner.

Waking up, going to bed.

Prior to start writing a paper or article

I turn back to Edward Hayes for a closing prayer¹ that sums up praying all ways and always.

Lord, who among us.

can pray always?

The practical things of lie

beds to be made, meals to be prepared,
a job to be held down, cars to be repaired-
these demand that I not spend all my time
on my knees before You.

Show to me, Ever-Present God,

how I can pray all ways and at all times,
and so pray always.

Reveal to me, Lord,

that nothing is foreign to You,
who are the creator of all that is,
and since all things have come from You,
the very use of them, with awareness,
can be the very truest of prayers.

Help me to be awake

to Your continuous movement about me:

¹ Hayes, Edward Pray All Ways (Forest of Peace Books, Inc., Leavenworth Kansas 1993) pg.163

in all the actions of creation,
in all the dynamics of discovery;
in work and play,
love and study,
within sleep and music,
feasting and fasting.

May I strive each day to expand the limits
of my times of prayer
until that blessed time when each hour-
day or night, asleep as well as awake-
will be spent in awareness of the Mystery.

With gratitude and praise,
in petition and adoration,
in a living communion,