

SETTING THE EMPTY TABLE*

Jeremiah 33:12-16

November 29, 2009—Advent 1

Have you ever wished you had kept your mouth shut when the subject veered off into politics? Such moments seem to occur when they are least welcome—like at the family Thanksgiving table. As sure as someone at the table asks the question—“So what do you think about the job the President’s doing?”—the fuse is lit. No matter who the President is—or what party is in power at the time—there are bound to be people sitting at the table at either ends of the political spectrum who explode with strong opinions. Instead of an intimate loving family affair it becomes family feud.

I'm sure there were times when the prophet Jeremiah was sorry he had ever uttered a word at the tables where he found himself. Jeremiah always seemed to open his mouth at the wrong time, and was always on the unpopular side of the issue. When his friends were waving the flag, he felt the need to point out the nation's flaws, and when everyone was criticizing the present administration, he felt the need to add balance.

Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? He must have asked himself that a thousand times.

His inability to hold his tongue cost him dearly. He was banished for a time from the priesthood. He was physically beaten and publicly humiliated on more than one occasion for nothing more than expressing his convictions. But still he came back for more. Why couldn't he keep quiet? What was this fire that burned within him?

After all, he could have enjoyed a peaceful life, a relatively comfortable life. He had the soul of a poet. He observed with joy the blossoming of the almond in early spring. He wrote of the migratory impulse of the turtledove, the swallow and the crane. Why couldn't he check those red-hot impulses that so often got him into trouble? Why couldn't he just sit back and enjoy the beauty of nature? He could cultivate a garden, enjoy the blessings of marriage and family. Why didn't he?

The answer is simple. There was a voice within that would not let him alone.

On the other hand, why couldn't his countrymen see the folly of their ways? He tried to warn them about where their greed, their disobedience, their disregard of right living would take them. But they would not listen. And because they would not listen, they were suffering the consequences. His country was now besieged. The land whose fertile soil once produced an abundance of crops was now a desolate desert. Tables that had once been laden with lamb chops and feta cheese and olive oil—the middle east version of turkey, dressing and pumpkin pie—were now empty save only for the crumbs of memories from thanksgiving dinners past.

It is at such empty tables that we begin the season of Advent this week. I know, I know. Bah humbug, you say. 'Tis the season to be merry—with jolly old St. Nick, right? And we'll get there.

But we have to prepare for it the right way. And the right way is NOT by playing Christmas carols the day after Halloween, or by putting out the Christmas decorations the week of Thanksgiving.

Advent is a season of contemplation and preparation. In order for us to savor the true Feast of Advent, which is our theme this year, we must first experience an empty table, to get a sense of what it would be like if there was no Jesus in our world.

What would it be like to live in a world bereft of Jesus.

The prophet Jeremiah described his world, the world before Christ, as one rife with injustice. It was a world sharply divided between the have and have nots, with no chance for advancement. People were getting away with murder, literally. Cheating was a common practice. It was a world empty of hope.

If we're honest with ourselves, there are still too many places where Jeremiah's time and place looks like our own. We hear about it in the news. A famous gangster was on trial for murder. There were many witnesses. The case was

airtight. That was why the judge almost keeled over when he heard the jury foreman pronounced the verdict: "Not guilty."

"Not guilty?" the judge shrieked. "But how? By what reason?"

"By reason of insanity," the foreman replied.

"Insanity?" the judge howled. "All twelve of you?"

Yes, that's sometimes what it feels like when we look at what feels like the lack of justice in our world. Someone's always getting away with something, it seems.

On the other hand, when we've done something wrong, when we've slipped up and chosen wrongly, we want justice to look the other way—and give us a break.

Don't you know that was true for the Louisiana state legislator who had worked hard with the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers group to enact one of the toughest punishments in the nation for those caught Driving While Intoxicated. Not long after the new law took effect, the first person to be arrested under the new law was that same Louisiana state legislator. Oops. (Hewett, James L. Illustrations Unlimited. "Judged by his own law." pg. 311).

Like the people of Jeremiah's time, we live it as we many times pronounce it—Justice is for "just us. We want the rules to protect our interests, our property, our health—and forget about others.

But as our nation's pledge of allegiance intones, God's justice is for all—not for some.

The days are coming, said Jeremiah, when God will bring forth justice out of the injustice that creates empty hope. Prepare yourselves for that day.

Jeremiah also described the void of righteousness in the people of his time. Where justice refers to the state of our society, our community, righteousness speaks to the state of our souls.

Righteousness is about living an honest life, honoring the gifts God has given us. Those whose sense of selves are bereft of any worth and purpose, who use their energies in trying to get the better of others, hurt others, violate others, end up only depleting themselves in the long run.

I know you've heard this famous illustration before, but it continues to hold truth for how important it is to live the righteous life God calls us to live.

John Smith was a loyal carpenter, working for a very successful building contractor who called him into his office once day and said, "John, I'm putting you in charge of the next house we build. I want you to order all the materials and oversee the whole job from the ground up."

John accepted the assignment. For ten days before ground was broken at the site, John studied the blueprints. He loved the layout—in fact, if he could design his dream home, this was it!

But instead, he lived in a modest house, paid with modest means. As he checked every measurement, every specification of this new project, John's resentment began to grow. Year after year, building dream homes for others while he lived so modestly.

The day before he began to build, he made a decision. "If I'm really in charge," he said to himself, "why couldn't I cut a few corners, use less expensive materials, and put the extra money in my pocket? Who would know the difference? Once the house is painted, it will look just great."

So John set about his scheme. He ordered second-grade lumber, but his reports indicated that it was top grade. He ordered inexpensive concrete for the foundation, put in cheap wiring, and cut every corner he could, yet he reported the purchase of much better materials. When the home was completed and fully painted, he asked the contractor to come see it.

"John," said the contractor, "what a magnificent job you have done! You have been such a good and faithful carpenter all these years that I have decided to show my gratitude by giving you this house as a gift." (Hewett, James L. Illustrations Unlimited. "Chickens coming to Roost." Tyndale. 1988. pp 288-289.)

We reap what we sow. A life that is devoid of righteousness brings lifelessness to us. The prophet Jeremiah looked around his land and saw the results of the unrighteous choices of his people in the barren landscape of their futures.

This was the direction the world was heading. Life before Christ, life without Christ, is a life that is as empty as a table in time of famine, useless without the sustenance of life for which it was built to hold.

But in our scripture this morning which comes from the part of the book known as Jeremiah's *little book of consolation*, we hear God say, "In this place which is waste, without man or beast, there shall again be heard the voice of mirth and gladness, the voice of bride and bridegroom, the voices of those who sing as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord. In that place which is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks.... In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

For the people exiled from their homes, this word of hope from Jeremiah was like a morsel of bread fed to those who had hungered for years. For those of us who are Christian, we believe that this was God's promise that began to set what was at first an empty table with promise and peace in the birth of Jesus Christ.

This morning, as we begin to journey toward Christmas, I invite us to confess to the empty places of our lives, where we still wait and hope for the Christ to be born.

Where in our world do we still seek justice for all of us in Christ's name?

Where in our own lives do we still seek to live a righteous life, honoring the gifts God gave us by using them for others?

If you've ever traveled out West, and gone through Four Corners, where New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona and Nevada meet, all you can see for miles and miles is high desert landscape dotted by mountainous formations called mesas—a background familiar to anyone who enjoys westerns.

Now if you know your Spanish, you'll know that those formations get their names from the Spanish word for table, because the tops of each are as flat as a table top. Mesa's are rock climber's dreams, and a few years ago I had the chance to hike a rather small mesa. I clambered up its cone-like side where a path had been made. All around me was stark stone, some red, some blackened. Nothing could grow in that dry and empty landscape.

At least, that's what I thought, until I got to the flat top of the surface. There, sprigs of life were coming up out of that tabletop, jojoba plants and small mesquite trees whose seeds were meals for birds and animal life alike. And a variety of cacti, of course, whose fruit in season were also luscious meals when they finally fell off the spikey body of the plant. There, in the wasteland of what seemed like an arid and desolate desert, a table was set for those birds and animals who hungered.

That's the promise God gave to us through Jeremiah this morning. The people who waited upon the Lord to bring this promise to fruition were not disappointed. The Branch did grow in our world—their Table was set with hope.

This morning, let us prepare for the Feast of Advent, knowing that there is one who is coming who will set our tables with Justice and Righteousness—and above all—Hope.

*This sermon was an adaptation of King Duncan's sermon "The Days are Coming" from Collected Sermons, King Duncan, Dynamic Preaching, 2005