

Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

I have long since forgotten the name of a book that nevertheless, I remember quite vividly. The author was a physician who took his family on vacation to a remote cabin in the woods. The family included a toddler who had a life-threatening accident as soon as the family arrived. He fell and lacerated his neck. Dad knew that few emergencies are as dangerous as neck trauma because of all the organ systems that are compressed there, like breathing, swallowing, and major blood vessels.

While the child hemorrhaged and screamed in pain, the family debated whether he would survive an attempt to get back to town – a long, arduous trek through the back woods. Or whether the physician father should undertake emergency surgery.

The man who told this story was a Christian with a loving relationship with God. He was profoundly conflicted about what to do. The odds were 50-50. Fifty percent the child would survive the trip back to town; fifty percent that he would survive primitive back woods surgery. Completely unknown and weighing heavily on the man's heart was whether his son would ever love him again: the daddy who stitched him up without anesthesia. The trusted one who bent over him and inflected grievous pain while his mother and siblings held him down.

Dad did operate. The child did scream in agony. The family did keep him as steady as possible on the hard wood of the rustic table. They got him to the clinic the next day where he was sedated for some time. When he finally woke up, with his family around him, he smiled and cooed. And he did, eventually, smile at and reach out for his father.

That's a true story. It has a happy ending, thankfully. It is also the story of Jeremiah who, as God's spokesperson, is in the role of the dad. He is trying to stitch up a lacerating wound in his beloved nation of Israel that, without radical intervention, will suffer serious consequences. The patient, however, has no interest in being stitched up.

This episode comes in God's relationship with Israel when the nation had wandered off. It had sold out. It had given its attention to other things besides God. The loving God of Israel, whom Jesus called "Father," was completely out of their consciousness. Out of sight; out of mind. And they did suffer serious consequences. In just a few decades, the nation was conquered and its people deported to Babylon.

What a tragedy. The consequence of selling out; of compromising where God fits into one's life. Israel – our forebears in faith – lost its focus. From the simplicity and joy of following God they pursued other interests, like getting ahead. Making money. Making a name for themselves. Before long, these pursuits became marked by evil. By greed. By the corruption that fuels greed. By oppression, especially oppression of the poor and the immigrant – extorting them for their labor without fair wages. By prostitution, in this increasingly greedy, oppressive society poor widows with no sons had few survival options except the sale of their bodies.

Evil stacks up: evil upon evil. They are the same evils that are around today, we just give them different names. “Greed” we call “profit-taking” and regard as just a common practice of the stock market. Oppression we say is unfortunate but justifiable because if people are being oppressed it’s because they are poor and have only themselves to blame. And prostitution? We call those engaged in sale of their bodies “sex workers.” We call prostitution a legitimate trade.

And God says, “Turn away from evil. Amend your ways and your doings. Or I will bring evil upon you.” It’s hard for us to hear those words, we who know God as loving; who experience God as the generative One endlessly perpetuating goodness. But sometimes goodness is disguised. Sometimes goodness looks like a father sewing up his son’s life-threatening wound.

God says, “I will bring evil upon you.” I don’t regard these words as a threat. I regard them as a prediction. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God predicts that if Israel or any society of people perpetuate evil, or make excuses for it, or simply look away from it, then evil will prevail.

Today we are witnessing the result of a blind, silent response to evil. Hate crimes. Gun violence. Recruitment of emotionally vulnerable people into terrorist cells. It hasn’t been enough for any of us to say, “I am not greedy, I do not oppress, I am not evil.”

Roughly 700 years after the prophet Jeremiah, another prophet arose: Jesus of Nazareth. He confronted evil with the force of his own life, rescuing those who were its victims. He healed those who had been ostracized due to leprosy or blindness, returning them to their families. He restored those who had been banished for their political alignment, like Jewish tax collectors, returning them to their communities. He returned human dignity to those who had been ground down by an oppressive society, like the woman caught in adultery.

And Jesus invites us to do the same. Jesus calls us to do the work of restoring and redeeming that he did. Our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, says that if you are breathing, you are called. We are all called to live like Jesus: resist evil by the force of our own God-centered lives.

But Jesus has some hard words, just like Jeremiah. He says, “Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* father, mother, wife, children, brothers or sisters cannot be my disciple.” The Greek word that gets translated as *hate* does not mean what our word *hate* means. Our word means to loathe or detest. It is a violent word. But that Greek word simply means *to love less*.

“You cannot be my disciple,” he says, “unless you love everything else less than you love God. You cannot remain as, abide as, my disciple unless you love God even more than that thing or person you most love in the world.”

It is a matter of priority. What priority does God have in our lives? This is something we all must navigate. And it changes. We may have God first in our lives and without even noticing it, God slips to number two or three. Or falls off the list altogether.

That's what happened in today's first reading. Good and decent people lost sight of God. They lost sight of loving God. Too bad our reading ends at verse eleven, where God says, "Turn now, all of you from your evil way; amend your ways and your doings." The people respond in the next verse; they actually say no way, God! They say, "*We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.*"

*Evil will.* What is evil? What is its source? The best definition of evil is *utter selfishness*. Evil is being so self-focused that nothing else and no one else matters. You've probably heard the description of hell as a place with a beautiful banquet table laden with delicious food. People are sitting on either side of the table. Unfortunately, each one has only a fork and it's three-feet long. They keep trying to feed themselves. What's evil about that? Well, if they would just look up, they would see a hungry person across the table. Their self-obsession is blinding them to anything but themselves. Too bad! Because with a three-foot fork, they could easily feed the person across the table and that one could feed them.

Jesus is conditional about what it takes to follow him. He says, "*If you want to be my disciple.*" The disciple of Jesus puts God first. The disciple of Jesus is ever watchful that the priority of self does not prevail above all else. The disciple resists evil with the force of his or her God-centered life.

The only thing that can keep us away from a God-centered life is our own pre-occupation with self. Don't let an over-inflated ego run off with your life. That's why Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate even life itself, will not stay with me."

He's talking about the ego-saturated life which, frankly, is something worth hating or loving less than the Lord of Life. If we want to be his disciples we have to love him first.

Amen.