

Tough Love
Jeremiah 1: 4-10
1 Corinthians 13
Luke 4: 14-21

Here's another 'wisdom and truth' saying from my mother, as passed on from my grandmother (and every other grandmother on the planet): "If you can't say something nice about a person..." - I'm sure you can help me finish the sentence - "If you can't say something nice about a person, don't say anything at all."

I don't think my grandmother would be too pleased with the Biblical prophets, or with Jesus either, in today's reading. **More often than not, the prophets don't have something nice to say and they don't keep quiet.**

The word of the prophet is often a word of judgment against the way things are going in society and the way people are living their lives. And yet, the prophet speaks out of God's love and hope for the world and for us. God is working constantly to make the creation good again. It reminds me of another saying, but not from my grandmother. My sister-in-law, the surgeon, used to tell us, "A chance to cut is chance to cure." Sometimes God works that way, through the prophets. **Through the prophet, God offers a kind of tough love.**

Take Jesus, for example, in today's passage from Luke. He has just finished reading from the scroll of Isaiah and telling the listeners that he himself is the fulfillment of God's scripture. They didn't quite get the full import of that statement; they let it pass. But they did all speak *well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*

“Surely,” as one commentator put it, “he was on the fast track to becoming a successful rabbi with a large following.” (Childress 19)

But then he had the nerve to suggest that Israel might not be the only people in God’s favor. Remember, he said, when there was famine in the land, how God overlooked the widows from Israel and saved the one from Sidon instead? And remember how he cleansed the leper Naaman from Syria but ignored the many lepers in Israel? So, Israel, don’t think that you have God in your pocket; don’t think that God’s grace extends exclusively to you; don’t take God for granted.

This was not music to their ears. This was not what they wanted to hear. So the people tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

But the ones who followed him knew that Jesus spoke out of God’s love for all people. A love that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus came to show the whole world God’s love. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

God’s love is tough for us to hear because it is challenging and demanding and uncomfortable.

Then there was Jeremiah, whose call to service we read at the start of our worship this morning. We didn’t read the rest of the passage, which goes like this: *“I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

Through Jeremiah, our loving God will speak judgment, not something nice, not something the people would like to hear. And in fact, in the end the people did not listen to him. In 587 BCE, Babylon overtook Jerusalem,

burned the palace, and destroyed the Temple. Jeremiah saw it all – the end of his nation and the beginning of the people’s exile in Babylon.

And yet, if you listen carefully, God also offers hope through Jeremiah. God also says, “I appoint you *to build and to plant.*” **God loves this people, but it’s a tough love.** It carries expectations and demands. But it also is patient. It bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

Sometimes we are called upon to carry the voice of a prophet.
Sometimes we are called upon to offer tough love. Did you notice that in the Call to Worship, the responses of the people were Jeremiah’s words? God says, “You, Jeremiah.” You say, “Not me, I’m too young.” Also read, I’m too old, too slow. God says, “You, Jeremiah.” You say, “Not me, I’m afraid; I don’t know how.” Also read, I’m too busy, too self-satisfied.

But sometimes we are called to be the ones to offer a prophet’s version of God’s love. You may be familiar with an organization called TOUGHLOVE International. It was founded in 1979 by Phyllis and David York, two family therapists who were struggling to raise an out-of-control teenage daughter. They explored traditional strategies including psychotherapy, changing schools, and trying to raise her self-esteem. Nothing worked. When she was arrested for armed robbery, the Yorks were faced with the dilemma that while they loved their child unconditionally her behavior was unacceptable and could no longer be tolerated. They also knew they could not deal with this situation alone. In desperation they took a stand that they would not tolerate a criminal in their house and created a series of “bottom lines” their daughter had to meet in order to return home. They used support group members to help. They concentrated on regaining their own emotional and physical health and prayed for the well-being of

their child. It worked. And out of this family's solution to a seemingly impossible situation emerged the principles and guidelines of the self-help organization TOUGHLOVE.

One father's comment on TOUGHLOVE: "I thought if I just kept telling my son I loved him no matter what he did, he would develop self-esteem and get back on track. I never realized what he wanted for me was to set limits, to let him know while I would always love him, I still expected him to act appropriately or there would be consequences." (4troubledteens)

So...sometimes we are called to carry the voice of a prophet and like Jesus and Jeremiah, carried ourselves by God's love, to lead someone out of trouble, out of a tough situation. It goes without saying that the ones who are in such a tough spot are themselves toughened - like the people of Israel - recalcitrant, obstinate, hard-hearted, deaf, and difficult. Yet we are called to love them with that love which Paul describes - patient and kind, bearing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

God always equips us - his messengers, his prophets, his disciples - for our task, providing the words and the will, the energy and the stamina when we feel we are faltering. To Jeremiah's "I do not know how to speak," God replies, "I knew you." To Jeremiah's "I am only a youth," the Lord answers, "I am with you."

I had a conversation once with a man, about my age, who was having trouble caring for his aging mother, who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. She lived in an assisted living facility in another state and he managed her care and finances from long distance. He was coping the best he could, but the real problem was guilt. He felt that he didn't love her as a son should, and that was because she was a difficult person to love. She was

resentful, critical, argumentative, unappreciative, selfish and unloving.

What to do?

God equips us for these times. We went to Scripture, to the commandment to honor your father and your mother. How might he keep this commandment in the context of his life with the kind of mother he has? He could not manufacture a sweet love that he did not feel, but he could love with endurance, patience and kindness and so release himself from bitterness and disappointment.

God equips us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, with Scripture, with prayer, and with a community of faith to rely upon. God's love is what sees us through the tough times and the tough people.

And now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Childress, Kyle. "Expect a call." *Christian Century* 9 Jan. 2007: 19.

Rev. Kathryn Henry

Peapack Reformed Church

Gladstone, NJ

January 28, 2007