



## TAKING OFFENCE

February 3, 2019, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 14:22-30

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Wade Huie was one of my preaching professors back in the day. At his funeral service several years ago, his son, Scott, told of a time when the family lived in Ghana. Wade was on sabbatical and had been teaching at the seminary there. When the term ended, the community gathered for a meal and presented to Wade a gift of appreciation. As he came forward, people began saying something in unison. At first, Scott said, he could not make out the words. Then, as more people joined in and the chant became louder, he realized the community was chanting, “Good news, good news, good news, good news...” Wade Huie’s students in Ghana and everywhere else he taught learned one of his core tenets: Preach the good news. There is so much bad news already...we have been given Good News to share!

With apologies to my professor, however, today’s good news sounds pretty much like bad news.

If ever there was a bad news prophet, it was Jeremiah. Called by God, Jeremiah resisted, and for good reason. One scholar puts it succinctly: “Jeremiah’s world is a place of disaster.”<sup>i</sup> We are not talking about a few discouraging setbacks, but the collapse of Judah’s entire world. Babylon had invaded Judah three times, crushing the institutions and hopes of God’s beloved people. The king’s residence was razed, the temple was destroyed, and leading citizens were deported to Babylon. An occupying army settled in and a long exile began. The Jewish people lost confidence in God. Into the ‘violent disintegration,’ God called Jeremiah to deliver more bad news.

Jeremiah’s resistance was no match for God’s “overriding verbs.”<sup>ii</sup> God gave Jeremiah six verbs—and four of them dealt blows to an already-devastated

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



community: Pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow...and then, only then, build and plant. Jeremiah had to tell his own community that Babylon, their enemy, was God's chosen agent in history in the face of their idolatry and unfaithfulness. In fact, Jeremiah said they should surrender to Babylon and cooperate fully since this is what God had designed. Jeremiah adds insult to all their grievous injury by telling the deportees that in Babylon they should seek the *shalom* of their captors because their own *shalom* would be found in Babylon's *shalom*.<sup>iii</sup>

You might guess that no one said 'Shalom' back to Jeremiah. His word was so unwelcome, in fact, that he was repeatedly imprisoned, almost killed more than once, was attacked and exiled himself. It was God's word that was unwelcome. Judah did not want to hear that their God could intentionally lift up another nation over God's own chosen and beloved people.

Lawrence Kushner, a rabbi and author, tells of Rabbi Schmelke of Nikolsburg, who would always hang his walking stick and knapsack on the wall of the synagogue he served. When the officers of the synagogue asked him why, he would reply: "I call out the truth as best as I can, even when that makes us all uncomfortable. And if anyone is displeased, I am always prepared to pick up my staff and my knapsack and to live as a wanderer—begging from door to door." Kushner says his own mentor in ministry had the same sense of call. He preached on the controversial issues the defined his time, like the Vietnam War and Civil Rights, and changing personal and social ethics. "In effect," Kushner wrote of his mentor, "he said to all of us: I like you. I love serving as your teacher; I'm honored you want me...but I don't work **for you**."<sup>iv</sup>

Rabbi Jesus took this approach when he preached to the hometown crowd in Nazareth. As we read in the first half of our text last Sunday, everything started off well that day in the synagogue. They were glad to see Jesus...asked him to read scripture, maybe say a few words...wow family and friends the way he had been wowing the crowds around Galilee. So Jesus read from Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, setting the oppressed free. He told them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," literally, "in your ears."



Today's reading picks up right there at verse 22 and the good vibes continue: "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

Billy Collins is a poet with a droll sense of humor. One of his poems is entitled *Tension*, and before the poem begins, Collins cites advice from a book on Writing Fiction that states: "Never use the word *suddenly* just to create tension." His poem *Tension* then begins: "Suddenly, you were planting some yellow petunias outside in the garden, and suddenly I was in the study looking up the word *oligarchy* for the thirty-seventh time. When suddenly, without warning, you planted the last petunia in the flat, and I suddenly closed the dictionary now that I was reminded of that vile form of government."<sup>v</sup> *Tension* goes on for eight more stanzas like that where, suddenly, nothing much happens.

Last week, we read 8 verses that went along quite smoothly and started out like that again today, where "all spoke well of Jesus and the gracious words that came from his mouth" when, *suddenly*, things get very tense indeed! Suddenly, at verse 23, all hell breaks loose.

Jesus turns on his home congregation. "I know what you all want from me. 'Do something here for us, your beloved family and friends, like you are doing out there for complete strangers!' Well, I am not your personal pet Messiah." Suddenly, it gets worse if you can imagine that. Jesus tells two old stories with a new twist: In Elijah's day, there was a severe famine in Israel. People were starving right here at home, but where was God's attention? Over with the Philistines in Sidon. That's where God sent Elijah—to help some unknown, un-Jewish starving widow and her son. And in Elisha's day—there were thousands of lepers in Israel. Men who couldn't earn a living or attend temple. They were forced out of the city limits, slept under bridges, scavenged for food in dumpster. Who did God heal? Namaan, a Syrian. A pagan. The commander of enemy forces. Jesus said: "I'm honored you want me...but I don't work **for you.**"



There was no closing hymn or benediction that day. The congregation suddenly filled with rage. Luke says they drove him out of town—and I don't think it was in a red convertible decorated with balloons and streamers. Just as they were about to hurl him off a cliff, suddenly, Luke says, Jesus passed through their midst and went on his way. Sometime later, on another cliff, there will be no such escape.

My phone rang one afternoon at the seminary where I taught. It was a pastor friend of mine whose congregation served, as Brick does, as a teaching church for seminary students. He needed me to come meet with the lay team working with their intern. It seems that this student, fresh from a study trip to Israel, had preached a sermon from Ephesians about Christ breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. The sermon began with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, turned next to the Chick-fil-A controversy about the definition of Christian marriage, and finished up addressing the PCUSA debate on ordination standards. The sermon was not well received and the Pastor had been out of town.

Another student in a different congregation preached the morning after the Trayvon Martin verdict had come out. Her text were the Ten Commandments. When it came to “Thou shall not kill,” she referenced our fear and prejudice that causes needless death and in the pastoral prayer, she prayed for the Martin family. She took a risk, she said later, to speak a truth from the Word of God into today. An email was waiting for her from a church member the next week. He accused her of preaching propaganda and advised her to leave the politics to the grown-ups. Facing that brusque dismissal, she nevertheless reflected on the experience theologically. She wrote: “I had a first taste of saying something bold in the pulpit and being fearless for a moment. I learned that if I am ready to speak prophetically...I need to be ready to take what comes from any side. I'm not sure if I would change what I said...if I *want* to change what I said...but I'm unsure where to go from here.”

Whatever ‘problem’ there might have been with either of those sermons, it seems to me that the more serious problem is that we can come to church for months, even years, and never be offended at all. God's startling word that the first will be



last and the last first; that we are to love our enemies, do good to those who harm us, care for the alien, visit those in prison, sell what we have and give the money to the poor, turn the other cheek, forgive beyond reason, lose our lives, all while not being afraid has been, as Walter Brueggemann put it, “flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. The Gospel is a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced.” If we took the Gospel seriously, we *should* take offence at its challenges to our sensibilities, priorities, and practices. In sovereign freedom, God’s grace is scandalously unfettered, challenging our ‘hometown theology’ that blesses what is familiar, comfortable, and safe. God’s far-reaching, boundary-breaking grace declares our nationalism too small and our church fights too large. “The Gospel,” Brueggemann presses, “is a very dangerous idea. We have to see how much of that dangerous idea we can perform in our own lives. There is nothing innocuous or safe about the Gospel. Jesus did not get crucified because he was a nice man.”<sup>vi</sup>

Will Willimon has called the church “the bland leading the bland.”<sup>vii</sup> We might be not only more interesting but more faithfully alive, too, if we take offence more often at the scandalous Gospel that has been placed in our hands. If we allow it encourage in us honest speech across our different perspectives so that together we might come to wider understanding and deeper theological reflection. Brueggemann warns that honest speech is abrasive because it rubs away the veneer of ‘niceness’ that keeps things static. We have gotten very good at abrasive speech in this country, but it hardly resembles the Gospel. Inside the church, and out there as leaven in the national loaf, we have not gotten offended enough yet to courageously engage in honest speech about:

- the racial divides and inequality that continue to plague our communities, work places and schools.
- our system of mass incarceration—the highest of any other country in the world, which has increased the prison population 500% over the last 40 years.<sup>viii</sup>
- the rising number of gun deaths, 39,773 in 2017, the highest in 50 years, nearly two-thirds of which were suicides.<sup>ix</sup>



- Our consumerist food practices where 1/3 of food is wasted while 800 million people in the world, that's 1 in 9, do not have enough food. And 3.1 million children under five die every year from poor nutrition.<sup>x</sup>

The texts today challenge our hometown theologies that can make us complacent in our own comfort. These texts bring us the bad news that, in sovereign freedom, God is at work among nations and in places and ways we do not understand and may not even like; the dangerous word that our *shalom* is intricately tied to the *shalom* of other nations and neighborhoods; the gospel truth that other lives matter to God as much as our own.

It is still not clear how much of this dangerous Gospel idea we are willing to perform in our own lives. How much honest speech we are inclined to try with one another. But if we try, and stay with it long enough, the prophetic promise is that the bad news turns out to be good news, good news, good news, good news...

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<sup>i</sup> Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Prophet Jeremiah and Exclusive Loyalty to God," *Interpretation*, April, 2005, 131.

<sup>ii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, **A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 26.

<sup>iii</sup> O'Connor, 133.

<sup>iv</sup> Lawrence Kushner, **I'm God, You're Not: Observations on Organized Religion and Other Disguises of the Ego** (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 20-21.

<sup>v</sup> Billy Collins, **Ballistics: Poems** (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), 55-56.

<sup>vi</sup> Walter Brueggemann, in an interview, "Honest Speech and Transformative Potential," with Mickey Jones for the National Public Radio program, *On Being*, December 2, 2014.

<sup>vii</sup> Somewhere in **The Best of William Willimon: Acting Up in Jesus' Name**.

<sup>viii</sup> See The Sentencing Project Reports: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

<sup>ix</sup> "Nearly 40,000 People died From Guns in U.S. Last Year, Highest in 50 Years," by Sarah Mervosh in The New York Times, December 18, 2018.

<sup>x</sup> World Hunger Statistics: [www.foodaidfoundation.org/world-hunger-statistics.html](http://www.foodaidfoundation.org/world-hunger-statistics.html)