

Home court disadvantage: Sunday, January 28

*Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30*

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 17, 2001

Early on, even Jeremiah could have located himself somewhere within Frederick Buechner's pithy essay on vocation in *Wishful Thinking*. "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet," says Buechner.

Jeremiah would later recall for God that initial gladness: "Your words were found, and I ate them; your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord God of Hosts."

Soon enough, however, the plucking-up and tearing-down words, along with the destroying and overthrowing words, sweet as they may have tasted coming off Jeremiah's tongue, began to stick in the craws of his contemporaries. A steady diet of rejection and hatred served up by even his boyhood friends eventually plunged the sorry prophet into self-loathing. Jeremiah tried to swallow the words and stop their flow, but they consumed him like a blaze in the belly and he could not hold them back. His compatriots hated him all the more.

At length he blistered God with the charge of rape. "O Lord, you have seduced me, and I was seduced; you are stronger than me and you overpowered me." Perhaps Buechner had Jeremiah in mind when he noted that his grid for locating vocation served only as a general rule. Or maybe vocation for genuine prophets conforms to different governing principles. For them, deep gladness and the world's deep hunger rarely intersect.

Jesus occasionally referred to himself as a prophet. Did this rule apply to him? The assembly that heard his gracious words in the hometown synagogue responded warmly, but before they could heap on too much praise, Jesus slipped a jeremiad—a complaint reminiscent of Jeremiah himself—into his talk. And his comments changed

everything. Now he had betrayed the hometown people by aiding and abetting their enemies.

Jeremiah betrayed Judah and Jerusalem when he handed them over to Babylon with the message that this was God's last hope for saving God's people. Jesus's treachery toward his contemporaries came from handing over their most cherished things, including hope for a messianic age, to the sometimes hostile peoples roundabout. He'd healed folks elsewhere, but not at home, even, he says, as in the age of Elijah and Elisha, when lots of people starved and lepers abounded but miracles from God came only in Sidon and Syria.

The words of Paul's great "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13, sound so charming that our culture commonly reduces them to greeting-card banality. Paul didn't mean to be sappy. He wrote with great passion to a community of Christian people engaged in tearing itself apart with disputes. Who was right? Whose gifts were truly crucial? Which members could they live without if things got too rough? Many of us live and work in communities, families or congregations facing the same struggles. What if we risked a dose of literalism and listened again to these sweet words and their implications? Does godly agape love shape our actions and inform our motives?

No matter what other powers, talents, wisdom or understanding we might have, without love they count for nothing. (Nothing?)

Love is patient and kind (even toward people clearly misguided, ignorant and wrong?), not boastful, arrogant or rude. (Well of course, but some of these jerks need to learn a thing or two—it's the only language they understand.)

Love isn't irritable, doesn't insist on its own way. (Whoever wrote this doesn't live with my kids, and surely wasn't subjected to today's karaoke church music.)

Love isn't resentful. (When they take me for granted, use me and never, ever thank me? Get serious!)

Love doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (No, no, no. Not after this year's election! I hope those fools stumble all over themselves.)

Now the congregation is stirring restlessly. We'd better shoot this messenger, don't you think?

Though Jesus eluded the angry worshipers that first time in Nazareth, he did not escape for good. When he'd finally let in too many outsiders, eaten with too many sinners and blurred the boundaries once too often, the crowds that had once shouted "Hosanna" eventually called out for Jesus's blood. With cross and nails they finally shut him up, but not before he cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Of all the prophets ever slain in Israel, America or anywhere else, God raised this one, this healer of gentiles and friend of sinners, so we might know that God has forgiven everything, and continues to do so even today. Despite everything, God is patient and kind toward us, not irritable or resentful. God laughs not at our weaknesses, but rejoices over the truth that we are all God's children. For each and for all of us, God bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That love never ends.

There we find the world's deepest need, and our deepest gladness.