



“To live by faith,
to be known by love,
to be a voice of hope.”

That is the mission statement of Mosaic Church based in Los Angeles (www.mosaic.org). In light of all the recent tragedies, I invite you to consider whether this mission statement might be one we could adopt.

To live by faith: to live in a way that someone who doesn't know us might look at our lives and say Wow! Integrity. Authenticity. What causes them to live like that? There's a model of how to live

that I want to emulate.

To be known by love: do I really, truly believe that everyone and everything is created by God – and more importantly, do I act like it? Even when I most profoundly disagree, do I still treat you with love and respect? Do I still work for justice and peace when the world is crazy and heartbreaking? Do I really and truly hear you when you talk? Do you matter to me? These are some of the ways that I believe each of us can be known by love- not as a doormat but rather grounded in our faith which calls us to love one another and most especially to love one another when we disagree.

To be a voice of hope: Somedays this is the hardest to do and to be. When senseless tragedy and violence and death are all around us, it can be really hard to be hopeful without being perceived as Pollyanna-ish. We have to face our reality head on and acknowledge the awful things that have been happening but we don't have to remain mired in despair, although it can be easier to do so. Remaining mired in despair asks little of us while being a voice of hope can be challenging and requires a thoughtful and respectful approach.

Today I want to focus on our reading from Jeremiah- for a number of reasons, and among them that verse 5 is very often taken out of context- or proof texted in ways that do not, I believe, reflect what God was saying then or now. This passage can help us move forward as we respond to our world. Hear again the words from the prophet:

The word of the Lord came to me saying:
before I formed you in the womb I knew you
and before you were born I consecrated you
I appointed you a prophet to the nations

Then I said, Ah, Lord God, Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.
But the Lord said to me, do not say I am only a boy
for you shall go to all to whom I send you
and you shall speak whatever I command you,

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71: 1-6; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Do not be afraid of them
 for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord
 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth and the Lord said to me
 Now I have put my words in your mouth
 See today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms
 to pluck up and to pull down
 to destroy and overthrow
 to build and to plant.

First though, some background about the prophet and the Book of Jeremiah. The prophet Jeremiah was called by God to speak to the people of Israel around the end of the 7th century BCE.

RE Clements believes that the importance of recording and preserving the words of prophets like Jeremiah has to do with the internal and external threats which overwhelmed the people and threatened the complete destruction of their national institutions and their religion- events that were destroying the very fabric and identity of the nation.¹ “Prophecy is the divine word of hope and explanation, which is the antidote to human despair” (14).

In some ways, this sounds eerily like today, at least to me. According to Clements, although Jeremiah was called in a time of great risk, he was also called to speak hope into a world loved by God- into a world God would redeem and restore. We, too, are called to speak hope and love into a world that is bitterly divided and very, very angry. A world which seems too often to have walked away from faith or trust or belief in a divine creator, away from a God who deeply loves us and wants the best for us.

Jeremiah served in a time where the majority of people felt pretty complacent but then as the disaster of warring armies from Babylon and Assyria and elsewhere threatened to take over their land approached, their complacency turned into despair, disillusion and hopelessness. Again, I see some parallels at least in parts of our culture today.

“The past was the past and could in no way be reversed. All that could be hoped for was that out of the ruins of the past a new Israel could come to birth and become the heir to all the ancient, but previously frustrated promises of God”(9).

Who and what was God to the people? Was God present or absent from all that happened to the people? Jeremiah felt that their “faith recognized the reality of human freedom, the stark and inevitable consequences that pertain to choices, and the fact that men and women may, in spite of every God-given warning, choose what is evil and spurn what is good” (14-15). Jeremiah prophesied that God’s love for his creation remains real, patient and searching and such love is ultimately hopeful and signals a new beginning (15).

Jeremiah’s call from God to be a prophet follows a familiar text. God calls. The person protests. God calls. The person comes up with reasons why it can’t be him or her- and God answers each

¹ Clements: Interpretation- Jeremiah, John Knox Press, 1988.

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71: 1-6; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13:10-17

excuse. Think of Moses complaining that he couldn't be God's prophet or leader because he stuttered. 'Gods response was, that's ok, I will cause your brother Aaron to speak for you. I'm too young- or I'm too old. So sorry, says God; I will tell you what to say so you don't have to worry about age or past experience. Whatever excuse is given to not do what God wants, is answered. God calls. You go. You live by faith. You trust that God knows your gifts and talents and would not ask you if God wasn't certain you could succeed.

Our verses this morning establish Jeremiah's credentials and his mission. According to Patrick D. Miller, the book of Jeremiah, asks us, today, whether we are obeying the Lord- do we listen to God's instructions or is our allegiance to a "lesser" thing.² Miller is blunt when he says "In the United States, such misplaced status happens when patriotism brooks no voice of conscience, no criticisms, informed by Scripture or not, that suggest the nation, the state, our country is wrong and its actions must be resisted" (763).

Which brings me to verse 5 as used by some to "prove" a particular point of view/ political position. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you;"

This segment of verse 5- and yes, remember it is only part of verse 5- has been written on placards and held up at protests against *Roe vs. Wade* or similar court rulings or legislation. I am not talking about abortion so you can relax!

One of my challenges with this is that the protestors are not even using the entire verse- so this is a classic example of proof-texting. That is, using a particular verse (or fragment) out of context to "prove" a point that has nothing to do with the verse **within its context**.

This verse is actually classic Biblical "call" language. What separates Jeremiah from Moses, Isaiah, Gideon and other prophets is that Jeremiah's call comes before his birth while the others were called later in life. The language of the call from God is the same: I know you. I have a mission for you.

Secondly, the idea that God knows us before we were formed is not unique to Jeremiah. There are many other places in our Scriptures where the theological position that we have always been known to God exists. For example, Psalm 139:15 "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in secret when I was woven together in the depths of the earth." Or Ephesians 1:3-4 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."

Third, when we wrap our political beliefs and actions into the church- that is, when we insist that the church to which we belong believes theologically as we believe politically- we run the risk of making the church our idol. There may be many instances where our faith and our political views are parallel. As long as you hold up your political views against the message of Jesus, the message of love and inclusion, then we are keeping our goal of being the light to the world in the

² Patrick D. Miller. New Interpreters Bible, Nashville:Abington Press, 2001 555et seq

forefront. That is the basis of part two of the Mosaic mission statement: to be known by love.

And, I freely admit that there are positions currently taken by The Episcopal Church that I am not comfortable with. I am more conservative than many of our church clergy and other leaders while I am more liberal in some respects than some of you. However, we remain at the table together to evidence our agape love for the other.

God does not ask us to slavishly accept positions on cultural or any other issues without engaging our brains and discerning what Scripture is saying to us. And, being willing to change our positions if we discern differently over time.

Live in faith
be known by love
and hope.

Despite all the tragedies facing the people in Jeremiah's time- and in our own- we can take comfort that God is with us. We can have hope that God knows when we are doing our best to live as Jesus taught. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Thomas Merton gave us a prayer that speaks to us as we attempt to live faithfully in this chaotic world and I commend it to you when the way ahead seems dark:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.³

Live in faith.
Be known by love.
Hope.

Amen.

³ Thomas Merton. Thoughts in Solitude (New York; Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1999)