

Do the Right Thing
Jeremiah 14:15-21 and Romans 12:9-21
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August 30, 2020 10:00 am

How do we do the right thing? It seems like an almost stupidly simple question, but I think probably something we don't think very much about, even though we make decisions about right and wrong every day, in our everyday...standing in the line at Wegmans, when somebody accuses you of having cut; in a chat room on Facebook; doing your taxes...how do you decide the right thing to do? And what's the North star for us as we make decisions about that, what might our tradition and this book provide us as a way to think about that question, how to do the right thing? Well, I want to begin reflecting on that question by thinking about Jeremiah. I was telling Louise a moment ago, he's kind of my hero in this time, because I think he has a lot to say to us living in America in this day.

But in the scene that we heard from Jeremiah, the book of the prophet, Jeremiah begins with a kind of private conversation between God and Jeremiah. And it starts with a request for vengeance. It's almost like Jeremiah says to God, "Look, I've done the job; I've done what you've asked me to do. And I want you to do one simple thing." As it says in verse 15, the beginning of the passage... "to bring down retribution for me on my persecutors." It was a very, I think natural tendency of the human heart to want to see those who've done us wrong *wronged*. We're going to think about why that is.

You know, Jeremiah, you might say it's prophet of sorrow. He was given an impossible job: to preach gloom and doom to a very complacent nation because they had gone off the rails. They had lost the values, the North star that had enabled them to become the people of God. The values contained in the law, the covenant God made with them. The center of those values embedded in the law have to do with equity and justice, especially for the widow and the orphan and the oppressed in the land. Instead of religion had become a transaction.

And the worst, most perverted form was a kind of idolatry that caused people to worship foreign idols like Moloch, a Canaanite god who demanded human sacrifice. They were sacrificing their babies to win economic salvation for themselves...to get what's mine, for *me*. That's what religion had become for them. Transactional. And for this, Jeremiah is terribly despised, you know, oppressed, especially by the false profits. Many of them hired by the King and who say, "Don't worry. It's all good. The stock markets at all time high and all the time high, the status quo is just fine and God would never let anything happen to us!" Meanwhile, Jeremiah tries to convince them that trouble's brewing, literally brewing; a boiling pot from the North will spill over, and does. The Babylonian hoard eventually does ride South with their horses and chariots and destroys the nation and takes them into captivity.

And so Jeremiah asks just... "I've done all this for you. I just want one thing: vengeance." Now there's a whole body of literature in the scripture devoted to this impulse of the human heart, the desire for vengeance. They exist mostly in the Psalms and they're called imprecatory Psalms. (I looked up on the internet, how to pronounce that. And if you're in Britain, it's, impreCATory Psalms.) These are those psalms where the writer is asking God, "Give me vengeance over my enemies, destroy them for me because I've been righteous. I deserve it. Just do this for me!" But God does not bless that emotion here or in other places in the scripture; God does not do what Jeremiah asks. God basically says, no, you know, just keep doing the job, keep doing the right thing. And I will make you like a wall of bronze. No one is going to be able to get to you. Those people spewing evil are not going to be able to touch you. Just keep doing the right thing.

And really the lesson here is what apostle Paul is talking about. How do we think about doing the right thing? Well, "don't return evil for evil." One of the impulses of the human heart is of course for

vengeance. And this is at the heart of idolatry. The very thing that Jeremiah has been charged to preach against is the idea that we can get to the good by means of evil. The delusion that winning at all costs is ever worth it. And vengeance is a form of that strategy because when we do that, when we ask for our enemies to be destroyed, usually what happens is that *we* get destroyed. Everything around us gets destroyed.

As I was thinking about this sermon and the title...somehow the title of a movie that was done long ago came to me; maybe you've seen it. It's a movie with the same title as the sermon; a sermon Spike Lee, a black filmmaker, who made the movie *Do the Right Thing* in 1989. It's kind of hard to believe. 30 plus years ago, that movie was put out and it's as contemporary now as it was back then. If you haven't seen it, you know, definitely well worth watching. It's about an Italian pizzeria owner named Sal and the pizzeria is in Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, which had changed from predominantly Italian to predominantly black. And the black patrons of the pizzeria, paying for the pizza, they say... "You know what? We want *our* heroes on the wall of fame. It's all Italian guys up there.... We want our guys up there." And so begins the tension between Italians and blacks in that neighborhood. But he narrates the ethnic and racial enmities among various groups in the neighborhood. And then one hot summer night, Sal, the owner of the pizzeria takes a baseball bat and smashes a boombox radio playing rap music, and then a fight ensues. And the police are called and a black man is choked to death by the police. And knowing that they had witnesses, obviously it was before video cameras. They stuffed the man into a police car and rode off and left everyone to fight. And everyone just ended up destroying everything. No one really won in the attempt to gain vengeance over one's enemy. The whole neighborhood was destroyed.

It seems to me that that describes the danger that America is facing today: becoming like the end of that movie. It seems to me that this is at the heart of idolatry. Again, the very thing that Jeremiah was asked by God to preach against was the idea that we can ever win by using any means to gain power over our enemies, to gain vengeance, to use the means of evil, to get to good. Because when we do that, we almost always end up destroying the good itself: the thing that we all acknowledge we want. I think it's that kind of idolatry that is destroying America.

I have never been so afraid for my country than at this time in my life. And I don't mean to be histrionic, overly dramatic about that. I hope I'm wrong. I hope there's not cause for me to be so worried, but I've just got to confess to you that I am. And maybe some of you have that same worry. America is being destroyed by a kind of idolatry, very similar to what Jeremiah was talking about. And here's how I would describe it, I guess the form it takes in America in this time: *tribalism*. Tribalism. We have become political and cultural tribes in danger of losing the values that bind us together as Americans, forgetting them. The neighborhood is going to be destroyed in the attempt simply for my tribe to win. And it's not one part of the political spectrum that's guilty entirely over the other, you know. The left sacrificing freedom of speech purify the tribe, claiming unless you're ideologically pure, you can't join my tribe.

Others who would sacrifice, like the Israelites sacrificing their kids, their children, to Moloch, they would sacrifice the truth. The very thing that enables human community is fidelity to the truth. People consciously lying simply to *win*. You know, the genius of our founding fathers, I think was the fact that they came up with a document that enshrines a set of values that bind us together; and in particular, made clear that our loyalty as citizens is not to any individual, like a King. We fought a revolution against that...or to a particular political party. Our primary loyalty as citizens is to a *set of values*: the Constitution. When a person becomes a citizen, if they haven't been born here, or if you join the armed forces, the vow you take is to uphold and defend the constitution as your highest loyalty. And the institutions the constitution creates are meant to protect those values. I think that this is our hope.

When we talk about doing the right thing, it's a simple message today. We can never get to good by means of evil. And when we try to win by any means, when we try to give in to that supposed satisfaction we think will come when we do anything we can to win over that person, to get vengeance, gain victory.... When we do that we end up destroying the whole neighborhood. So doing the right thing as a citizen, I think is probably pretty clear in the next 70 to a hundred days: to do whatever we can to focus on those values that bind us all together as Americans, those values that came from this book, our Judeo Christian heritage, whatever we have to do, that is the right thing and not to get sucked into the win at all costs mentality that predominates, especially our political parties, in our political life.

But I think there's another deeper thing that we need to pay attention to. And this is where we turn to the apostle Paul and his great letter in Romans chapter 12, because we are individuals trying to create a different culture as a church community, try to trying to live differently from how people out there live...people who find no problem using violence to get their point across, to gain vengeance. How do we do the right thing here, as Christians, not just Americans? Well, we don't have time to focus on all of the, you might say guiding lights, the ethical dictates in Romans chapter 12, but you know what? Put that on your reading list, because if you want to know how to do the right thing, just read Romans chapter 12: "Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil." So you know doing the right thing doesn't mean being a milquetoast. "Outdo one another in showing honor, persevere in prayer. Don't return evil for evil..."

I want to zero in, since we don't have time to do justice to all of those, but to zero in on one. The thing that was hard to do for Jeremiah as we saw at the beginning of that text in Jeremiah about vengeance: to bless those who curse you. He goes on to say at the end of the chapter and this I think begs for some reflection, you know: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they're thirsty, give them drink. And by doing that, you'll heap burning hot coals on their head." That's from Proverbs. He's quoting from Proverbs. And it's kind of like, you know, I think it's almost as if God is saying through Paul here, "All right. You know what? It's natural that you feel like you want vengeance, but if you want to get that, instead of trying violence, let's try love." Let's see if that works. Maybe that's the silver standard because the motivation is still vengeance, but maybe when we apply love, then eventually that desire for vengeance fades away. I don't know. All I know is it takes practice and it ain't easy.

I want to end with a story that I've told several times around our family dinner table, and it's been caused for a lot of discussion among Catherine and Will and myself, but I'll leave it to you to determine what this might, how this might be helpful. I was driving up to Cape Cod for our vacation and I'm in my Tesla, my dream car. And it tells you you've got to stop to charge up. And so I stopped at this place in Rhode Island. It's a place I've been to before. And as I'm driving in, I noticed there's a Panera restaurant with these outdoor tables. That'd be a great place to get the dog fed and watered and do its business. My dog Story, who is the cutest dog in the world, all of 14 pounds, our little black dog. And so I go to these tables, all outdoor and they were full. And by the way, I'm reading the book by Ibram X Kendi about how to be an anti-racist. So I've got all this anti-racism stuff floating around in my head. And then I go to one of these families that seems to have an extra place, a chair where I can tie the dog and get, get food. Cause there's a glass wall there. I can see the dog. And the family says, no, no, there's a kid who's using that. You can't use it, not terribly friendly. And then I go to another family. No, our son is afraid of dogs. No, we can't help you. And then I go to another couple and they have two extra chairs at their table, one with their stuff on it. And one was free. And I say to the gentlemen, I say, "Do you mind if I use this chair to tie my dog while I get lunch?" And he said, no. "No. Why don't you go across the street?" [Pointing] And across the is a shopping mall across four lanes of traffic, about a quarter mile away. And I said, "Well, I'm just trying to get lunch. And he said, "You know, we should call the police on you. You should not be here." And by now my reptilian brain is starting to kick in, you know? And I'm thinking about what I'm tempted to say, but instead I say, "We have a difference of opinion," and I walk away and try and find something to tie my dog to.

People can see my I'm getting a bit frantic. And then finally the woman from the first family said, "Do you just want someplace to tell you to take your dog while you get lunch?" I said, "Yes, in fact," and by that time, this couple, the mean couple who told me to go across the street, was getting up to leave. I noticed that, and I say, "Are you getting up to leave?" And the guy says, yes. And I thought about what I wanted to say, and it's not what I did say. And yet what I actually said had a certain kind of satisfaction. And so I said with all the sincerity I could muster, "God bless you." And the guy didn't know what to say. So he said, [loudly], "*God bless you too.*"

And for a good while I had my kind of fight or flight response still activated. And my blood pressure was up there and I felt a little traumatized. I thought, you know what, I'm reading Ibram X Kendi. And this is just a small slice of what it might be like to have a skin color that would cause reactions like this. I think there's way too much one could make of that. But then I imagine what the conversation might have been like in the car with his wife. You know, maybe I did really get that guy. And I thought, *what's that about wanting to do vengeance by doing good? By not returning evil for evil, and it's burning hot coals on your head.* Maybe it's the best we can do for now.

But whatever it takes, we cannot get to the good by means of evil, not in the checkout line at Wegmans when somebody accuses you of cutting in line; not in the chat room at Facebook, when you're talking about Donald Trump; it's not going to get us there. But focusing on what binds us together as human beings and as Christians...not getting it over your enemy...but *love*. let's give it a try.

Amen.