

Us and Them, Then and Now  
Jeremiah 1: 4-10 ; Luke 4: 16-30  
A Sermon by Pastor Nicholas W. Gliha

Today we are beginning a 3 week sermon series called Just Mercy. Just Mercy was recommended to us at our district Charge Conference as a way to inject civility back into civil discourse. Just Mercy is based loosely on the best selling book of the same name from Bryan Stevenson. I highly recommend you pick up the title. I read it in two days, it was that captivating. Bryan Stevenson is a african american lawyer and activist for changing the criminal justice system. Allow him, to give some of his own reasons for why this needs to happen. <<video>>

This brief segment from a much larger video on racial injustice can be a difficult thing to hear. We want to believe that this is greatest country on the planet. We want to believe that our system gets it right. We want to believe that everyone is secured the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We want to believe in the American dream. But who is it for? I mean that mantra was written almost 100 years before black people were even considered human. It wouldn't be for another ten years that black people would even be considered 3/5ths a human let alone a full one. For 246 years in this country we enslaved people and for another 80 years we segregated.

Even today we have a month long government shutdown over the exuberant cost of building a wall that keeps the other out. Exceptionalism. This country is for "us", but who is "us"? What is greatness? Bryan Stevenson represents a voice that runs counter cultural to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and it is a message that needs to be elevated. That is the purpose of this sermon series. My segment is helping us to see the other, and Rev. Joyce in the following weeks will help us work with and love the other. What would Jesus do? What would Jeremiah, prophet of the refugee do? That is what they would do. In a time of heightened anger and fear of the other, these men not only comforted and welcomed but also challenged.

Look: Comfort and challenge are the leading ideology of the scripture passages, and ultimately the main purpose of this sermon series. For as many times as Jesus is a source of comfort and mild mannered parables in scripture, he is also a loud and proud rebel rouser against a system he grew up in. So Jesus is born to Mary and Joseph, grows up in the Galilee region, a region of poorer working class people known as tektons. Your blue collar run of the mill type person. He follows in the footsteps of his father but eventually has a bit of identity crisis of whether or not he should be whom his family and community wants and expects him to be and who he is supposed to be as

the Son of God. If you want more on that, I preached that same tension on Dec. 30th, you can download that message on our website to learn more.

Then Jesus turns 30, is baptized, a practice done by the “crazy” Jewish sect known as the essences, and he is baptized by no less than a crazy person known as John the baptist who looks as if he hasn’t showered or been in mainstream culture his entire life. You can probably imagine that Mom and Dad are a little concerned about their baby boy at this point. Then Jesus comes home to preach a message in the temple, and he reads from the ever so popular and beloved prophet, Isaiah. A message of hope against tribulation. Jesus says that the message is fulfilled to them this day. They are all amazed the text says. The whole group. Saying things such as “is this not the Son of Joseph?” But then the conversation drastically changes. He quotes a second scripture, the story of Elijah and the ravens and widow at Zaraphath.

If you want more on that story, I preached that one sometime ago called “from death to live” encouraging us to know that a raven doesn’t consider itself a bird of death and we should be wary on what we are labeling as death. And the crowd, the whole crowd, all of them, drive him to the cliffs with the intention of throwing him overboard. What happened? His first message, the proclamation that the good news is here was interpreted as being the good news for “us.” and his second teaching said: Oh no no, the good news, is for “them.” It was a message of inclusivity and the breaking down of the Judean exceptionalism that had ruled the day for as long as Abraham.

But on the topic of exceptionalism, we should turn to Jeremiah. We’ll come back to Jesus in a moment. Jeremiah is a prophet of heartbreak. His writing comes out of 3 devastating wars with Babylon and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. He has witnessed family and friends be drafted to war and never come back, he had gone into exile, and he had his whole family reject him over things he believed in. Ah, so Jesus isn’t alone in that regard. You see Jeremiah was a son of a priest, but their theology has a little bit off. As a result of some affairs with Solomon, David’s son, the priests of Jeremiah’s family rejected the Davidic line. In other words, they did not believe the Messiah would come from one of “them.” Jokes on them, right?

As a result of the bitterness of the temple and of religion, the politics of the community also went down the morality toilet. They elected officials that did not represent faithful ideals and Godly living and as such they stopped worshipping God and looked to other false gods instead. Jeremiah rejected this thinking, he supported Josiah for king, a candidate who wanted to return the people to following the will of God. But Josiah lost, and his family rejected him as a result. Jeremiah spend the next 30 years trying to convince the people that exile would come to them if they did not stop. His message was rejected, time and time again. Why? Exceptionalism.

Up until this point in history, the Israelites have been God's chosen people. When bad times came, God saved. And it doesn't matter how much we mess up or go astray because will still and always will save us. Us, not them. Their temples were even designed to reflect that. God resided in the back of the room, the holiest of holies and only the male priests with wealth and privilege were allowed in that room. The women, the gentiles, the diseased, they were forced in the courts farthest away. The message could not be clearer. You do not belong to God, God belongs to us.

So contrast this with Jesus, who comes home to preach in a temple designed in a similar way, except he turns on the sound system in the court of the gentiles, the court of the women and diseased and says, "This is here for you."

This message sounds sweet to our ears, but it should be challenging. Because what does our temple look like? Does it look more like the holiest of holies where God can be experienced in here, in this box, for us? Or does it look like Jesus looking beyond our walls? Is our ideology that of exceptionalism? If people want us or need us they'll come to us. In an era of church decline the exceptionalism says it won't happen to us. We have a healthy endowment to cover the bills, we'll be fine. But to worship our endowment is a false god and Jeremiah has a few words about idol worship. Words that people of his era did not want to hear either.

If you wanted an idea of what Jesus would say to us: it would be something like this. We are going to use our entire endowment to help fundraise for affordable living in Chagrin. Section 8 housing. We are going to use our entire endowment on establishing college funds so that every 4 years for the remainder of the balance we will send x number of kids from Chagrin Falls Park to college fully paid for. Or build a ministry aimed at single teen moms where we will watch their kids so they can go to school still. We are going to use our entire endowment to create a drug and addiction rehabilitation center right in one of the storefronts downtown. We are going to use our entire endowment to help make chagrin falls look more diverse, culturally, religiously, ableist, sexual orientation and all. In other words, we are going to use our entire endowment for them, not for us. Those feelings you have right now with this spitball ideas. That anger, that heresy I've said, that confusion, that fear, that is how the people of Jeremiah and the people of Jesus' hometown felt. That is why they drove him to cliff.

But to be the church, we need to say things that make privileged people want to throw us from the cliffs. And to get to that place we need to turn to Jeremiah and I'll say this in closing. God has called us, despite our willingness and our excuses, God has called. Because God doesn't see the weaknesses that we perceive about ourselves.

God sees our strength for God is with us and God is a source of strength. God tells Jeremiah and by extension us, that the road will not be easy. God tells us that we must tear down and destroy before we can build and plant. We must tear down exceptionalist beliefs, we must tear down fearful bunkering in, we must tear down the voices that spread racist, xenophobic and exclusionist viewpoints. We must tear down the walls of the holiest of holiest so that everyone can hear and see God. We must tear down the fear of the other, we must tear down the systems of preference and privilege for how church should be, we must tear down the belief that church should not be political because believe me your silence is equally as damning, we must tear down the belief that it is for us. Jeremiah is told by God that he will build and plant. It does not he will complete the construction, not see the fruits of his labor. Simply to place one brick in the right step, and water the seed. We may never see the fruits of our labor, but if we follow the will of God, the will that leads Jeremiah to the nationS, not nation, than the kingdom of God will be one step closer.

All of this sounds great, but where do we start? How do we do it? In preparing for this message I spoke with Martha, who is the counselor who works out of our church and I asked her: "If people want to reach out to those different from them and feel uncomfortable, where do they start?" she said in return: "When I was in seminary part of my chaipancy was to work with drug addicts and I remember being so fearful of them. Saying there is no way I could help them because we have nothing on common. My professor told me something I'll never forget: "They are just like you, just more so." You experience joy, so do they. You experience anxiety, depression, and compulsions, so do they. At the end of our conversation together she shared a final thing saying: "in over 36 years of doing this and working with all sorts of people, there is one thing in common with every single person; underneath all their shame, depression, fear and mistakes, there is a heart of pure love and joy. My job is to help let the light of that heart shine." Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that our job too? That is mercy, that is grace, that is the kingdom of God. That is the message of Jeremiah and Jesus.

As we conclude and transition to our time of communion I encourage you to hear these following words from poets Andrea Bieler and Luise Schrottroff who reflect on the Eucharist in their poem "Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection"; they say: "For while 50 million americans are currently dieting to lose weight, nearly half that many are collecting food stamps and/or standing in line at the local food pantry. And so we witness today that God has put us in the center of this justice movement; we witness today as so many have done before that we will not turn back from this table of righteousness; we recognize that when we witness the welcome of 'other' people, when we put ourselves at the center of this communion, we witness the welcome of all

marginalized people; we will witness to every denomination the river of justice that is God's plan." Amen.