

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Year C (Proper 17) – August 31, 2025
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Berkeley D. Johnson, III

May I speak in the Name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity; One God, now and forever,
Amen.

I used to invoke that as a declaration, but decided a few years ago that that was a tad presumptuous; so I added the three words at the beginning: “May I speak” to turn it onto a petition or request, which feels more appropriate.

And it's worth starting right there, because today's first lesson, from the prophet Jeremiah, is in fact a declaration of the one true living God, YHWH.

We heard last week of the call of Jeremiah, who was told that he was to go and preach God's word to the nations, and so today we have the first glimpse of where that is headed, and we can see why Jeremiah might have been a little hesitant.

So I am not going to shy away either from wrestling with this lesson.

In fact, Linzi+ called me while I was away a couple of weeks ago visiting my family back east to see if I still wanted to preach, as her plans had changed and she was going to be here.

But I had already gotten a hold of the readings, and this was a sermon that wanted to be preached.

It has, however, also resisted being tamed into a four-page, double-spaced, written document; so as I type this out for a third time, I still don't know if I will be reading the words on this page, or just winging it.

But I think it's great that Linzi+ can be here today and that we have a lay preacher standing up here, because it gives you, and anyone else who is new here, some insight into how we came through the recent transition from Caro's+ retirement to having our new priest here.

So, I am going to share with you how I approach lessons like the one we have this morning, where we encounter what I will refer to as "divine displeasure". It doesn't have to be the way that you approach them, but it has, for me, proven over time to be an effective way of engaging with texts like this without sinking into despair or denial.

And before I tell you how I wrestle with texts like this, because the Psalm is also along the same lines, I want to state what I think we must not do with them, which is to dismiss them by saying, oh, well that's the angry God of the Hebrew Scriptures; because we have Jesus, the God of the Christian scriptures is a God of love and grace.

Don't do that! Because that's decidedly not the answer; Jesus himself in fact declared, I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

So, what do we do?

The better approach, I have discovered, is simply to acknowledge our collective or corporate complicity in systems that God is displeased with. Because if it was true in the time of Jeremiah, and it was certainly true in the time of Jesus, what makes us think that it isn't still the same today?

All one has to do is follow the modern news cycle to see that not much has changed over the centuries since these texts were written.

Here's an answer I've heard over the years in my journey through ministry: oh, well you know, the God of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scripture, is a God of wrath and punishment; but the God of the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, is a God of grace and love.

Don't do it, people! Don't even think that for a moment!

Jesus himself said "I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it", right?

Jesus is the personification, the embodiment, if you will, of God's divine plan for justice. Truly, to follow Jesus is to work for the undoing of the systems and structures, the dismantling of the powers and principalities, that have fostered a world worthy of the words of divine displeasure spoken by the prophet Jeremiah this morning.

I will confess, I came to the conclusion a long time ago, as we delved deeply into scripture in our studies, that if we haven't encountered something in scripture that condemns us, we simply haven't really read the Bible. And if you have managed to read the entirety of our holy scriptures from start to finish, and have never once felt convicted, excluded, or condemned, I would love to talk with you about that after the service.

And that's how we keep them alive; not by taking them literally, but by taking them seriously; as applicable to us today as they were thousands of years ago.

And by approaching them from this perspective, it accomplishes another important goal or objective: it takes us out of the navel-gazing worry about whether our individual behavior will be pleasing enough to God to save us.

And I have a story about that, and why it ultimately doesn't work.

What are today's false idols? Perhaps we have seen one clearly this past week. Children were shot and killed in church at school as they knelt praying, and we're not going to do anything about it. Perhaps we can see our guns and our propping up of our 2nd Amendment as a modern false idol.

As we embark on the Season of Creation in the church this September, perhaps we can see consumerism, environmental degradation, and the looming climate crisis, which we're now apparently going to ignore until it's too late, as reasons God might have the prophet warn us as Jeremiah has today.

So that's why it's important not to dismiss these difficult lessons as the rantings of an angry God who has been replaced by a loving God who is the Father of Jesus, who loves us.

Remember, Jesus says I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill the law, and I think this is the type of lesson that goes to the heart of that declaration.

If we are complicit, and we recognize our complicity, then how do we approach the altar? With humility, it would seem to me.

If we repent and ask for forgiveness, and are in fact forgiven, how does that leave us feeling? Pretty grateful, it would seem again to me.

How empowering is it to know, that in spite of these atrocities and abominations, that we are being empowered by the one holy, living God, in Christ, to speak out against injustice, to act to dismantle the unjust structures and systems around us, to confront the principalities and powers, to do our part, to offer ourselves, to that service.

That's quite literally the example Jesus gave us, that Jesus showed us, that Jesus left for us.

We try to justify ourselves; perhaps we hope against hope that our personal piety will outweigh our collective involvement in these systems – story

Surrender, repentance, asking for forgiveness – not only for the evil we have done, but the evil done on our behalf, seems to me to be the key

The Gospel lessons today seem clear to me: don't exalt yourself; give to and do for those who cannot repay you; I imagine those who contribute to our outreach ministries experience the truth and grace that accompanies that work

But the part of the gospel lesson that jumped out at me today, which I think is the link to what we've been covering from Jeremiah, occurs at the top of the passage

Jesus was invited to the dinner, and he *noticed* how the guests were angling for the best, most prominent seats

It reminded me of the opening prayer which should be familiar: to you all desires are known, and from you no secrets are hid

Right? Jesus saw into their motivations; we are known, and there is no escaping it

We were messing up in the time of Jeremiah; we were still messing up in the time of Jesus; so doesn't it stand to reason that we're likely still in the same boat today?

So rather than hoping we're somehow exempt or that our good works, or attempts to do and be better people, will somehow outweigh the evil of the systems in which we are collectively involved, perhaps the way to inner peace is to accept the fact that we are part of this great humanity, groaning its way toward God's kin-dom, and we just leave it to God to handle it

Does doing this absolve us from our personal responsibility to strive for justice and respect the dignity of every human being? Of course not! Rather, I believe, it frees us up, it liberates us from the navel-gazing preoccupation we have over our own behavior, or the perceived behavior of others, and allows us to speak out against injustice and to work for a more equitable society where all have enough.

Because God has certainly provided an abundance - enough for everyone, but the distribution plan down here has gone awry, hasn't it. Human greed is the same now as it was then.

But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

I will confess I used to struggle with my own worthiness as far as coming to the altar. You know, I did some things this past week, month, year, at some time in my life, that made me feel like I should exclude myself.

But I think we all have a sense of our unworthiness. What I am saying today is that if that's the final answer, then we're all in trouble.

But it isn't. And that has been promised to us as well, and we have just as much of a responsibility to take the promises seriously as we do the anger and displeasure God expresses through the prophet this morning.

The Eucharist is, quite literally, the Great Thanksgiving, the thanksgiving that the divine wrath and indignation expressed this morning is not the final answer, and that we are called to participate in the risen life of Christ in and through this holy communion.

So perhaps our best posture, our best response, is to approach God's table with humility and gratitude, that we have been incorporated, grafted, woven into the Body of Christ, and utilize that

knowledge, that understanding, that power, to go forth into the world, to love and to serve Christ and one another.