

Denying Self**COMMUNION**

September 3, 2023

Jeremiah 15:15-21

¹⁵ O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult. ¹⁶ Your words were found, and I ate them, and 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.

¹⁷ I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. ¹⁸ Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.

¹⁹ Therefore thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them.

²⁰ And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD. ²¹ I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”



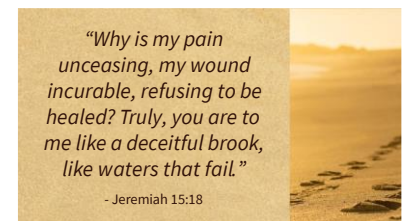
Let us pray...

Please turn with me to Jeremiah 15 as we begin this time together. Jeremiah was a prophet of God who lived about 600 years before the coming of Christ. For over 40 years Jeremiah addressed a nation who refused to change its ways despite many warnings. He warned the people of the impending disaster that was coming as judgment from God. As you can imagine, as Jeremiah spoke of death, starvation, and captivity, he was not all that well received. Can you recall a time when we you were lost in your sin, really having a grand time, when someone who loved you called you out? As I think about one instance of this, I can remember that I did not want anything to do with that person. Can you remember something like this from your past? Well, imagine that person staying on you for 40 years? That was how the people of Judah felt with Jeremiah.

Adding to this tension and conflict was Jeremiah’s above reproach lifestyle. As God’s confidant and mouthpiece, Jeremiah incarnates the divine life. God’s word flares in his very bones, driving him to powerfully call for repentance and to warn of consequences.

Jeremiah has walked the fine line of engaging the people, but not succumbing to the temptations and behaviors that they so enjoy. It is a hard place to be. In verse 15 he asks God to *“bring down retribution”* on those who persecute him. Then, in verse 17, he pines about the isolation that his role demands: *“Under the weight of your hand I sat alone.”* Jeremiah’s inner conflict reveals that human perspectives and desires are often at odds with God’s ways and understanding. Under these circumstances, the prophet begins to wonder if the problem is not the peoples’ sin, but God’s heavy hand. While Jeremiah is certainly upset over the abuse that he has endured from the people, it is the perceived abuse from God that most upsets him. Bad things are not supposed to happen to good and faithful prophets. He is struggling with the battle between his own comforts and the role that God has called him to play. Here, in this confession, we begin to see the necessity of the way of the cross, the way of denying self in order to be in a faithful relationship with God.

His lament culminates in verse 18, where he pours out his emotions and struggles. Here he writes, *“Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly,*



you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” While we may be shocked to hear such words spoken at God, Jeremiah’s words fall well within scripture’s traditions of lament. This is why God’s response expresses no offense at all. Throughout the scriptures, and particularly in the Psalms, it was perfectly acceptable to challenge God’s apparent unreliability. The language of lament assumes that God values relationship and is open to being personally affected by a believer’s suffering.

God's response once again reiterates the role Jeremiah that has been called to play. There is definitely an aspect of denying self in these words. God calls Jeremiah away from thinking of self and back to focusing on the role that God has



called him to. Not even demanding the slightest of apologies, God lays out the conditions of service. *"If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them."* God invites Jeremiah to turn back to God, to speak the words that God gives him to speak.

If the terms are acceptable and are carried out, then Jeremiah can once again stand in God's presence and serve as God's *"mouth."* And if Jeremiah bears up under the increasing tension between God and the world that is tearing at the core of Jeremiah's being, then it will be the people who turn to Jeremiah's words. The precious words of God will go out and find an audience. He will not be the one who falters and stumbles into the ways of the world.

Hear the power that God will surround and sustain Jeremiah with. Reading from verses 20 and 21, *"They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless."* No matter what comes, no matter how heated things become, God will deliver Jeremiah, God will redeem him from the *"grasp of the ruthless."* What a powerful promise. God does not want Jeremiah to remain trapped in this place of darkness and pain. God speaks these words of grace, calling Jeremiah to get back out there and to go back to the divine work that God called him to long ago.

And yet Jeremiah must remain pained and dejected. He must continue to speak truth and to endure the persecution. He must do so because God is torn up over the choices and behaviors of the chosen people too. Jeremiah's suffering that he bears reflects God's inner turmoil over the sins of the people. In grace God has relented from judging the people yet refuses to leave them in denial. For this reason, God calls Jeremiah to persist in the inner turmoil, torn, like the divine self, between loving the people and hating their sin.

As we move close to turning to our gospel text, let us consider one last lesson from Jeremiah. Their relationship is one of intimacy and trust, of devotion and faithfulness. In the inner struggle, we can see that God's claim on Jeremiah's life is delightful and devastating at the same time. There is an intensity to their relationship. Remaining true to God has devastating effects on Jeremiah's life. They range from persecution to loneliness and rejection. But the anger that wells up between Jeremiah and the world and between Jeremiah and God is evidence of love.

The opposite of faith is not anger but indifference. Only those who love experience hurt, anger, and doubt. Those who are indifferent are just fine. This is true of us and of our relationship with God as well. When we feel that inner turmoil, when we struggle with the ways of the world, when that righteous anger rises up in us – then we are responding to God's claim on us. When we shrug our shoulders, turn away, and say, "Oh well," then we are demonstrating indifference and we are revealing a lack of commitment to our faith and to our relationship with God. Instead of being willing to count the cost and to step forward in trust, we are seeking comfort and elevating self over the call of God. Turn with me now to Matthew 16 as we gain understanding of Jesus' expectations of us in these kinds of situations.

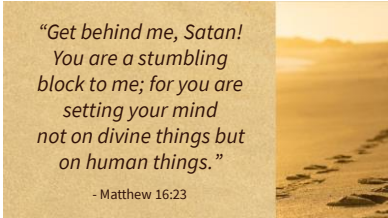
Our passage begins with *“from that time on.”* That connects directly to the end of last week’s passage where Jesus sternly warns the disciples to not tell anyone that he is the Messiah. That warning is echoing in their ears as Jesus begins to shatter their image of what this Messiah was sent to do. Jesus gets right to the point. Speaking of his journey ahead, Jesus says, *“He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”*

Jesus will not ride in on a magnificent white war horse. He will enter the city humbly on a donkey. There will not be an army of zealots fighting to make him king, never mind a legion of angels. There will be temporary cheering, followed by a mob shouting for his death. There will not be a throne but a cross. This deconstruction of their messianic expectations is too much for Peter to bear.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, saying, *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* Peter is saying “no” to Jesus. Some would say that this has become a habit of the church and of the followers of Jesus – this saying “no” instead of listening to and following the nudge or whisper of the Holy Spirit. I kind of hate to admit it, but when the Spirit says “cross” I often respond with “self.” Maybe you do too once in a while. Maybe you do too.

Jesus turns to Peter and responds in force. Jesus says to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on*

human things.” What a statement! At first, I thought, boy, I’m glad I’m not Peter. But as I reflected on that I came to realize that, yes, at times I do choose my way over Jesus’ way. Yes, I do have my mind and heart on earthly things, not on divine things. At times I need to hear as stern a word as Peter got from Jesus.



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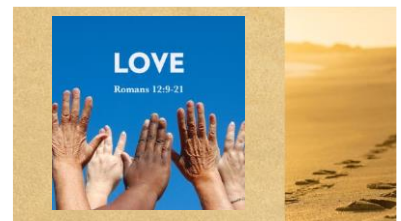
- Matthew 16:23

Continuing on, Jesus explains what it means to set our mind on “*divine things*.” We must take up our own cross and deny self. We must be willing to do as Jeremiah did – hearing God’s voice and stepping out boldly in faith, speaking truth to the world, bringing light into the darkness. Jesus says, when we are willing to lose this earthly life, we then find kingdom life – life that is full and abundant. We can do this only when we are willing to lose the whole world instead of forfeiting our soul.



There are stark differences between the ways of the world and the ways of the cross. According to human wisdom, cross-bearing is for “losers.” According to the wisdom of this world, “winners” are those who know how to master the game of life and have the wealth and goods accumulated to prove it. Some who are in the world might even explain that the cross is something that Jesus did for them. Jeremiah and others willing to speak the word of truth would say, no, cross-bearing is what we are called to do in response to what Christ did for us on the cross.

As we close, we turn our attention to this question: What does self-denial really mean? In our gospel text for today, Jesus is pretty vague. In a general sense it boils down most simply to the two great commandments: love God and love neighbor. That too can be vague. To better understand what it means to deny self, turn with me once again to Romans 12. In verses 9-21 Paul unpacks what it looks like to bear one’s cross in the best sense of the term. GPS question #3 invites you to read and explore this list. For this time, let me just summarize what Paul understands as bearing our cross. The list is full of actions and attitudes that make our lives meaningful.



Paul encourages us to have genuine love for one another, to practice tenacious goodness and perseverance even as evil rises up, to exhibit patience in suffering, to bless all – even those who persecute us – and to reject the urge for revenge. This list, of course, is drawn from the stuff of Jesus’ life and ministry. To bear one’s cross and to deny self calls us to walk in the footsteps of our example, Jesus Christ.



To bear our cross and to deny self invites us to serve others with compassion, even when it is hard. To bear our cross and to deny self asks us to set aside our own agendas in order to

be obedient to where and whom the Spirit might lead us. To bear our cross and to deny self means that we are choosing to align ourselves with divine things and not human things. To bear our cross and to deny self leads us to hold the keys to the kingdom. It is not a human kingdom but a divine kingdom. Day by day, when we faithfully bear our cross and deny self, we begin to live a beautiful and meaningful life in the here and now. And we begin to catch a glimpse of God’s eternal kingdom, both then and right here on earth. Day by day may we be drawn deeper and deeper into the kingdom of God. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When and where has it been common to say “Oh well” instead of addressing inappropriate or ungodly behavior? How can that change?
- 2) *Pray*. Forfeiting our soul in order to gain the world is a daily battle for most of us. Pray for one another this week for victory in this daily struggle.
- 3) *Study*. Read Romans 12:9-21. Which “marks of the true Christian” (that’s what this section is titled) are hardest for you to practice? How can you improve these?