

God's Problematic Word

Jeremiah 1: 4-10 Luke 4: 22-30

I'm on a religious forum on Facebook. A new thread was started by a known conservative on the forum which [linked to an article](#) about the Director of Faith Engagement for the Republican National Committee who has spent 2 1/2 years speaking to 54,000 pastors in 39 states. He has three things he wants them to advance: voter registration, preach biblical values, which he said means opposing gay marriage, and vote biblical values which again focused on marriage and preserving America from its immigration problem. In other words, a red cape was cast in my general direction.

I commented, "Faith leaders are lost when they take their lessons from the RNC (or DNC) rather than from the Kingdom's Sovereign." He replied, "I honestly don't think Jesus would disapprove of any of these suggestions." My response was, "I find the omission of any mention of the poor, weak, marginalized, sick, and outcast revealing. That was Jesus' ministry, not electing political candidates." He said that I was straining to make such a point, suggested that I wasn't using my brain, and ended by saying that we would both be judged accordingly. I sensed from his judgment inference that he didn't think things were going to go too well for me.

I do seriously believe that **neither** political party represents the agenda of God or Christ, and the mere suggestion by *any* political party that it does is something that I find ludicrous and offensive. More disturbing to me is that 54,000 pastors have apparently made some effort to listen to these instructions.

The conversation on Facebook showed our tendency to believe that God's word is a good reflection of whatever we believe. The notion that God's word could be something very different from whatever we believe has a hard time penetrating our belief systems. This gentleman was quite perturbed by my challenge.

(There was another case where someone really went off on me. I found the diatribe so amusing that I copied and posted it on my wall. In that case, I thanked him for putting in so much effort in his comment since he was clearly aware of me, and I seem to matter so much to him.)

In other words, the reaction can be quite bitter and angry. The harshness of the response reminds me of a story. A man was driving to work one morning and the light coming up turned yellow. Dutifully, he slowed and came to a stop at the line rather than hitting the gas and blowing through the light. There had been a woman tailgating him, and she was furious. She leaned on her horn, honked repeatedly, leaned out the window and was gesturing madly and yelling a variety of unkind things at him for stopping for a yellow light. She was about to take a breath and let loose with more invective when she heard a tap on her car door. She looked behind her to see a police officer with a not-very-pleasant face looking down at her.

The policeman ordered her to step out of the car and place her hands on the car. After a quick pat down, he escorted her to the back seat of his cruiser, saying nothing. She insisted to know what was wrong, and he would only say that she needed to be brought to the police station.

Once there, she was searched again, fingerprinted, photographed, and locked in a holding cell. After a few hours, a police guard came to the holding cell and opened it up. He led her to the booking desk where the original officer was waiting, holding her personal effects in a bag.

He said, "I'm sorry for the mistake, ma'am. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, giving the guy in front of you the finger and yelling nasty stuff at him. I noticed your "What Would Jesus Do?" bumper sticker, the "Choose Life" license plate, the chrome Christian fish symbol on the trunk, the Joy FM decal, and the "Follow Me to First Church" bumper sticker, so naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

When events take over our mind and spirit, we can react in surprising ways that may not make us too proud of ourselves in retrospect. Suggesting that God's Word is different from your own word is one of those situations that can provoke a hostile response. Yet, provoking is often exactly what God's Word is intended to do.

While there is great joy in serving and ministering in the name of the Lord, there are agonies along the way, sometimes in such a degree that you wonder if you're sane for doing this stuff, if this is really worth it, and if God has lost his mind for calling you to do it. Answering the Lord's calling is something done with a bit of fear and trepidation, because the experience of such servants shows what a difficult path it is.

Such thoughts were likely when young Jeremiah was confronted by the voice of God. The voice explains how Jeremiah was known to God even before he was born. Remember a few weeks ago how we talked about God's name for us? Listen as God names Jeremiah – *Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a **prophet to the nations***. That's his name: Prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah thinks this can't be right. God must be in error. Young Jeremiah tries a dodge, wimpering, *Ah, Lord; I do not know how to speak; I am only a child*. God brushes off this hesitation: *Don't say that! **You must go wherever I send you and say what I command you!***

This really sounds like a dangerous calling, and my guess is that Jeremiah's knees are going wobbly about now. Jeremiah is aware that God often sends his messengers into harm's way, like Moses challenging Pharaoh as one example, or Elijah facing down King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. That's quite dangerous duty.

As if God knows what he's thinking – or God heard his knees clattering, God says: *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you*. Let's turn around what God's saying, kind of a reversal reading: if God says don't fear, then we're talking about

something fearful. If God is going to rescue you, then you must be in some mortal danger. How does this calling sound so far?

In Isaiah, you'll recall his vision in the temple had an angel touching his lips with a burning coal. Here, **God himself** reaches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's lips, saying, *Now I have put my words in your mouth*. At this point, there is no turning back. God's words will come out of your mouth, inspiring fear and putting you in danger.

God then describes the power of God's word. It says: *See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant*. It is not that Jeremiah himself will be doing the toppling of kings and kingdoms, no more than Moses took Pharaoh to the wood shed all by himself. No, it won't be Jeremiah, but God's word has unmistakable power and a force, just as God's mere speaking of words brought about the creation in six days.

This power of God's word has been placed in Jeremiah's mouth. And yes, he should fear and look for the rescuing hand of his God. He's going to need it.

While God's word will bring kings to their knees and kingdoms to ruin, in a corresponding way, it will also bear the power of building and planting, of making God's new things happen. We forget that God is always trying to renew and to grow. In order to do that, hardened ground needs plowing, creating furrows where new seed can be planted. There is disturbance and disruption, the loss of the way it's always been, and the way we thought it should remain. God's word breaks apart the crusted clods, and plants new seeds for new things to happen; destruction and creation go hand-in-hand.

When the word is heard, it can have a powerful effect. We're used to turning to God's word for assurance and comfort in times of anxiety, doubt and threat. We can find spiritual inspiration and personal renewal, consolation and reconciliation, being strengthened for our journey.

Far more often, God's word is challenge and confrontation, seeking to pierce the accepted and commonplace, urging disruption and causing discomfort. In the hands of the preacher, from the mouth of the prophet, from the spirit of the good teacher, God's word is unlikely to get a warm response from listeners. Comfort and assurance is a lot more popular than a jolt of contrary information and exhortation.

That brings us to Jesus. We pick up just where we left off last Sunday, with Jesus in his hometown synagogue, having taken up the Isaiah scroll that says: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me* Concluding the reading, Jesus says: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*.

This is potent stuff, pretty much proclaiming that he is the anointed one of God, the chosen One, the Promised Messiah. Presumably he said more than the one sentence since the narrator shares how "amazed" people were at the "gracious words that came from his lips." Someone asks the question – and we don't know the intent really – *Isn't this Joseph's son?* Presumably, there is some marveling in the crowd that a son of a local

carpenter, of a hand laborer, a common working stiff, is the Messiah. Moreover, the Messiah is only notable to these people as “Joseph’s son.”

We should also realize that they figured his generous words about freedom, sight, release and favor was their own blessing. ‘Great,’ they’re saying, ‘the Messiah is from among us and he will bless us first and foremost.’

Jesus then responds to them: ‘You will say to me, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ This means to take care of your own. They’ve heard about his blessings in Capernaum and now they want theirs. It’s like folks going to Oprah and they want to hear her say, “A car for you, and a car for you, and one for you, everybody gets a free car.” And why not? They heard how Oprah gave away cars to her audience at one show; now they want theirs!

It’s a small scale version of what Jesus will experience throughout his ministry, people expecting him to be *their* Messiah, not **God’s** Messiah, wanting him to serve *them* rather than have him serve God. Big, big difference.

Jesus has some news about this blessing business for the hometown crowd. Let’s take a look at who gets the blessings as Jesus commences teaching them. Consider Elijah who blessed the **non**-Jewish woman from Sidon in Lebanon. Or Elisha, successor to the great prophet; he healed Naaman the **non**-Jewish Syrian. So you see, Jesus teaches that God’s prophets are not spirit-filled magicians serving the hometown crowd. They are servants of God who empowers them, who puts his word in their mouths.

We hear how this doesn’t go over too well since the home team has one of the worst reactions to a sermon ever; they try to throw the preacher – Jesus – off a cliff. That’s never happened to me. Then again, I haven’t preached near a cliff. Note to self: don’t preach near cliffs. Jesus walks through the crowd to continue his ministry for another 20 chapters. God’s word will not be stopped.

When the word is heard, and the word is God’s authentic expression, it *can* be disturbing, precisely because that’s just what God intended. To shake up our stale, stifling pattern, to pry open our blind eyes, to break through our clogged ears, and to light a fire under our fat and happy tushies, God’s word can come along and rock our world. In fact, it should.

Servants of God are summoned to bring his word, to shine a light in the darkness, to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release for the oppressed, and the season of God’s favor for those who thought God had forgotten them. This is our shared ministry and our shared calling in service to our Lord Jesus Christ.