

## *Contrary to the Acceptable*

Jeremiah 28: 1-11    Matthew 10: 40-42

I think most normal people like to do things that are acceptable and therefore to be accepted themselves. Normal people appreciate when others also do the acceptable thing in order to make themselves acceptable.

Although we may get hung up when our desire to be truthful, honest, and candid would also be unacceptable and cause problems. Most men have learned that when your significant other asks how they look, being truthful, honest, and candid may not be the wisest response ... if you value your life and relationship. We might have learned that it would be best to pull back from being truthful, honest, and candid to some form of compromise statement, like "I'm not sure that's the right color for you," or "That's nice, but maybe something that brings out the color of your eyes would be better." Some spouses, like mine, simply don't ask any longer. Maybe that is what 39 years together does to a couple.

There are also social situations that can give us fits like that. We have probably learned good ways to negotiate the truth versus outright lying. You may even have a technique to buy yourself some time to come up with an appropriate response, like scrunching up your eyes and tapping your ear while shaking your head saying that your hearing aid cut out - "Could you repeat that?" Of course, it helps to be wearing hearing aids.

There are other social situations when it is impossible to negotiate between truth and compromise in order to do what is culturally accepted and acceptable. When moral and ethical standards are either at risk or are allowed to be exceeded and violated, that's a key situation. This may mean bucking the very culture in which you have been a participant. The line gets crossed and you see yourself going forward as either part of the problem by acceptance or as part of the answer by refusal.

Those faithful to God as servants of the Kingdom often find themselves in this part-of-the-problem or part-of-the-answer situation. As people of faith, we should have developed some pretty clear ideas of what God and Jesus expect of us. These ideas - the values, practices, and attitudes that are hallmarks of a Kingdom orientation - are continuously coming into conflict with the accepted and acceptable ways of the world. The fact that it more often does not produce more conflict is an indication that people of faith are either ignorant of what is expected, dismissive of what's expected, or find those expectations too problematic for them to act upon. In other words, the conflict is not worth it; it is easier to go along and accept the values, practices, and attitudes that the world finds acceptable.

Those faithful who throw such caution to the wind, who take seriously what is expected from them, and have the depth of faith to make their stand are the ones we should pay attention to. These folks know that their chosen path may bring them a slew of problems, but they proceed anyway.

The prophet Jeremiah is one of those worth paying attention to. Jeremiah is a prophet in the royal court. What is acceptable for the court prophet is to find some way to affirm the decision of the king, not to question or challenge it. Jeremiah has often run afoul of this culture of acceptability, and he has employed various means to dramatize his contrary positions in conveying what he understands is the will of God.

At this point, the Babylonians have conquered Judah and taken over Jerusalem. They've looted the Great Temple and are carting off all of its many valuables. This has incensed the people of Judah, the religious leaders particularly. The Babylonians stealing their national and religious treasure defiles the Temple and robs the people of their pride and identity.

There is talk among the religious leaders of revolting against Babylon, resuming warfare, seizing the Temple's treasures, and throwing off the yoke of their oppressor. Among the prophets in the room are Hananiah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah had been put under house arrest by the king at the time for issuing God's judgment against Judah and insisting that Babylon was the tool of God's judgment, and that they needed to submit to their punishment.

Well, Jeremiah is still on the same platform, only now he has been instructed by God to wear a yoke, symbolizing God's yoke upon Judah to be borne for its sinfulness. Jeremiah insists that God's people are to submit to Babylon's yoke for it is God's yoke, and revolting against Babylon would be like revolting against God. You see how that works? Needless to say, Jeremiah's preposterous yoke is annoying to all.

Chapter 28 features Hananiah offering his prophecy the religious leaders. According to Hananiah, God will free the God's people from Babylon's yoke within two years and return the treasures to the Temple. You can imagine that this popular thought brought cheers from religious leaders. "Yes, God has punished us enough. Now God will restore us and lead us to victory over our oppressor. Nebuchadnezzar will no longer rule us!" Woo-hoo! God will deliver us from evil and uphold his people!

Then Jeremiah chimes in. Imagine scowling faces staring as Mr. Yoke-Around-His-Neck begins. I'll paraphrase a bit:

*Amen, Hananiah! May the Lord do it! May the Lord make what you prophesied happen! Bring back from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, **and** all the exiles. But hear me out. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. If the prophet who prophesies peace has it come true, then clearly the Lord has sent that prophet.*

Jeremiah is mocking Hananiah. They have competing prophecies.

Jeremiah has the rather negative prophecy that condemns Judah with God's judgment and requires its submission to its punishment. On the other hand, Hananiah

brings a positive prophecy that God is even now planning to quickly finish Babylon's occupation. Judah will be freed from the yoke of Babylon and the Temple will be restored to its sacred purity and with its treasured vessels returned.

In response, Jeremiah is saying: 'That would be great, Hananiah, except all the prophets before us have prophesied judgment. **This is it.** Peace and restoration would be wonderful, but see this yoke around my neck; that's the bitter pill – Babylon's occupation – that God has sentenced us to bear.'

Dramatically, Hananiah seizes the yoke from Jeremiah's neck and breaks it, repeating his prophecy that, as he has broken Jeremiah's yoke, so will God break the Babylonian yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah walks off.

If you read the next verses, Jeremiah is told by God of Hananiah's death sentence. Jeremiah confronts his rival and says: *Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. Therefore the Lord says: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the Lord.* A couple of months later, Hananiah **is** dead.

The story tells us that God's word and way may **not** be what we (or anyone else) **want** to hear. Turning God's difficult word and way into something that's more pleasing gets tried numerous times in scripture, and it doesn't work out well.

In the New Testament, there is reason for concern about what the word of God in Jesus would bring in return. In the community of faith where Matthew composed his version of the gospel, we're quite confident that persecution and condemnation of the message and person of Jesus was commonplace. It was a community suffering under a yoke of persecution.

During Jesus' Missionary Discourse, of which we had a selection last week, the role of the prophet gets acknowledged. In the same sense, the problematic message of those who fulfill the role of prophet is acknowledged, too.

This passage is brief, opening with a connective statement like something from John's gospel. *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* That's a nice statement about the importance of hospitality to the stranger, in particular the stranger who is sharing the good news of Jesus and his promise of gracious new life. That stranger comes from Jesus, from God.

The next sentence is a three-fold sequence, and it takes things in a different direction. The wording of all three is a bit awkward because it reaches to make its point. It follows that relational connection of: *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*

First, it is the prophet sent by a prophet whose host earns a prophet's reward. We don't know exactly what constitutes a prophet. In this new era of Jesus as Lord, who is a prophet and what does that calling mean? We get no real answers here. We can guess

that it would concern one (or more) of the four areas of missionary service – heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and resist evil. And if we don't know exactly what a prophet's role is, we can hardly figure out a prophet's reward. We can assume that the reward is the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus for the host as they have aided the prophet in fulfillment of their promise.

Second, it is the righteous one sent by a righteous one whose host earns a righteous one's reward. Again, we lack a good definition of either a righteous one or their reward.

Before we break into a sweat over it, let's check the last one. *And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.* In the first two, it was about receiving the reward. In this last one, it is about **not losing** your reward.

Remember how I had said that Matthew's community was struggling with persecution. This is perhaps the best example: a believer who helps another believer who was sent by the Lord. It does not say that they will receive a believer's reward; it says they won't **lose** the reward.

And it wasn't simply "help a believer." It is put minimally and specifically about giving just a cup of water. This cup is offered to "one of these 'little ones.'" Of course, "little ones" doesn't refer to children. The "little ones" have made themselves dependent on faith in the providence of God as they do their mission work. They're willing to risk in a big way for the sake of the gospel. But they're also despised, and possibly hunted, having earned the wrath of those in power. Helping them puts the host at considerable risk themselves.

By using the negative, the expression plays on the fear of the one who would offer aid to a persecuted believer. If caught, the host may face severe punishment, imprisonment, or even death in some cases. As fear gets inspired by the threat of loss, Jesus seeks to make it clear that, while the potential for loss exists, you will not lose the reward that matters above all else, the new life promise of Jesus. Is that enough for someone to summon the faithful courage and risk life and limb?

It seems that even fellow believers would prefer to turn away one of their own rather than risk persecution themselves. That's how powerfully dangerous the word of the Lord was in that situation. Talk about unpopular.

The word of the Lord was never designed to be popular. How it has become "popular" today is something that should give us pause. We should seriously consider whether the word that is "popular" is still, in fact, the word of the Lord. It shouldn't be, and wouldn't be, if today's disciples were actually committed to Jesus' word, and not the one that is so popular.