

Suspect Popularity

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

Being popular isn't always what's good and helpful. It is what's pleasing and gets the positive attention of an audience. Sometimes it's hard to understand why something is popular, like the fidget spinner that I mentioned in an earlier sermon, a small item that has become wildly popular among adolescents and teens that I encountered as a substitute teacher. It does nothing more than spin around. A spinning top at least moves along the ground and is fun to watch. The fidget spinner is held between the fingers and it spins very nicely, but it goes nowhere and does nothing but spin.

In politics, it's called populism. It's nothing new in American politics. At the turn of the century, Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan was labeled a populist when he ran in 1896 and 1900. Bryan had a passionate appeal to the common man and a nostalgic view of "the way it was" in America. Bryan ran against big money, against rich, east coast elites, for "free silver" against the gold standard, against the big corporations, and against foreign interventions, wanting the government to take care of its own citizens instead of foreign interventions.

A populist during the Depression Era was Huey Long, Governor of Louisiana. Known as "The Kingfish," Huey Long stirred crowds as he railed against the wealthy and the banks, producing a socialistic "Share the Wealth" plan with the motto, "Every Man a King." *[Under Long's leadership](#), hospitals and educational institutions were expanded, a system of charity hospitals was set up that provided health care for the poor, massive highway construction and free bridges brought an end to rural isolation, and free textbooks were provided for schoolchildren.*

Long was so popular that he was planning on running for president in 1936. Yet only one month after the announcement, he was assassinated by the son of a political opponent. His last words: "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do." His funeral was attended by 200,000 people. Imagine the ladies who put on *that* reception!

Even Ocala has had its own brush with populism. *In December, 1890, [the Southern Farmers' Alliance], its affiliate the Colored Farmers' Alliance, and the Farmers' Mutual Benefit Association met jointly in the Marion Opera House in Ocala, Florida, where they adopted the [Ocala Demands](#).* Among the *Ocala Demands* was the abolition of national banks, state banks to loan money to farmers, free silver, prohibition of alien ownership of land, seizure of land unused by railroads and corporations, a graduated income tax, and direct election of US Senators who were then still elected by state legislatures. Radical stuff for the time, but echoes of the populist tone in all these examples can still be heard today.

Like the popular, the populist appeals to what the people want, feeding their sense of being victimized by certain powerful interests, like big banks and corporations, fueled by a sense that society's structures have been stacked against them, and that

others are benefiting who are not deserving, or are not “real Americans,” whatever “real Americans” means at the time, whether it’s 1890, 1900, 1935, or 2016.

We meet a populist in the passage from Jeremiah. No, it isn’t Jeremiah, but another court prophet named Hananiah. Here, the Babylonians have conquered Judah and taken over Jerusalem. They’ve looted the Great Temple and begun 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 is Hananiah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah, you’ll recall, was 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 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.

The prophets are called to utter God’s often painful word to God’s people. Often they pay the price. But walking away from God is not always something that you can accomplish. Ask Jonah, a fellow who wanted to go his own way and had God turn him around. Moses, too, wasn’t looking for excitement. Rather he had his eyes more on retirement as a shepherd.

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 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 fidelity of God and 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 the 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.