

14th Sunday after Pentecost: Jer 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

The sermon I set out to write is not the one you are about to hear. And so, I don't really want to give this sermon. This sermon makes me uncomfortable. Because I myself need to hear it. In that we all like the loving, merciful, patient God, but we don't really like to speak of the God who is so angry about sin that he warns us if we do not repent that there are consequences for sin. In fact, we are told the Lord disciplines those he loves (Heb 12:6), and to "Work out our salvation with fear and trembling," (Phil 2:12). We like that God loves us but not that he chastises us. We love the love part but not the fear and trembling part. And we do not fear and tremble to attain to our salvation for salvation is a gift of God through faith, but rather to work it out, meaning to grow up into the godliness we have been freely given. But walking with God "in fear and trembling" is not a message we like to hear. And I am not suggesting we all don cardboard signs on street corners yelling, "Fire and Brimstone." But I am suggesting we not water down God's words. And I am even further suggesting that when we hear God's words, that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we apply God's words to our lives. Given in the eight readings from Jeremiah that we are covering each Sunday, God is repeatedly very clear in stating that if the nation of Israel does not repent and turn to Him, he will destroy the nation. But we don't like the word repent and we don't like the word destroy. We read of God's angry justice poured out on ancient Judah, and we excuse this concept away even now in our churches, saying, "That is the God of the Old Testament." But God has not changed. The message to the Israelites as given by Jeremiah is the same message to America. Because here we sit, 21 years post 9-11 forgetting that Nations without God have not God as their defense. Not one person in the twin towers was any more a sinner than each of us. In Luke, 13:4, Jesus answers the question posed to him about eighteen people dying when the tower of Siloam fell on them. I mean imagine that. There is actually scripture where Jesus gives a response to people who want to know why God permitted a tower to fall upon people and kill them. And Jesus says: "Do you think they were more sinful than all the others living in Jerusalem? No I tell you. But unless you repent, you too will all perish." I mean, wow. This is not the answer that I want to hear from our Lord Jesus. This

is a harsh answer. I mean this isn't even a parable that Jesus responds with whereby we can be confused. Jesus simply flat out says: "Unless you repent, you too will perish." And so, whatever you want to take away from Jesus' response, he is pretty clearly setting forth the importance of repentance because we never know when we are going to die. And not only that, but he is warning us that we do not want to die in our sins. Meaning how we live our lives matters. But Jesus' answer offends us. So much so that it tempts us to water down God's words by rationalizing out a softer response. Yet this is the answer that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, of whom God says: "This is my beloved son, listen to him," (Lk 9:35). This is the answer Jesus gives to those who cannot understand how God could permit a tower to fall on people and kill them.

But by Jesus saying this, he gives importance to the ones who died. When we see something like this happen, it is only natural for us to think it could have been us or why not us or in the harshness of Jesus' words, just as easily should have been us for we are all the same. And so their deaths will only *serve us* if we *cherish* that they died in essence in our stead. By reflecting on their deaths, we are sobered to not only gratitude for the life we have, but a sense of urgency to not waste our lives. Their lives cut short warn us. And this gives their deaths meaning. The brother of the fallen responder who started Tunnels to Towers gets it. He knows it could have been he himself and to honor his brother's remembrance, he is living in such a manner so that his brother did not die in vain. He is trying to do the good his brother could have done had his life not been cut short. We owe 2,996 people a debt to live our lives fully surrendered in repentance to God, so that they did not die in vain by our own lives remaining fruitless. We owe this same debt to Jesus. And even more so. Because Jesus literally died in our stead. And I believe there were believers who died in the towers. Perhaps many if not all. And so, *wow* again. In our hearts we say, they should not have died, but God's word says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," (Psalm 116:15). God does not say his saints will not die; God says that when his saints die it is precious to him because we are precious to him. If we were to study the book of Jeremiah for more than a mere 8 Sundays, we would receive many insights into how God operates including how much he grieves our sins and the consequences. In Jeremiah chapter 4 verses

18 through 19 and 22 God says: "Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart! Oh my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me...my people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good." God is talking about God's children right here. And we are God's children. And in chapter 6 verse 10, God goes on to say: "to whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the Lord is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it." God writhes in pain and has agony of the heart when his children sin and do not repent and when we are warned we find God's words offensive.

And some may say to me, "Well gee, Heather, this is a very unpleasant sermon indeed. We come to church to feel good about ourselves." Well, I'll tell you how to feel good about yourselves. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." That's Luke Chapter 3 verse 7.

There is more than one instances in scripture where God says if he can find a few people or even one person seeking him, he will spare other people. This happens when Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham gets God to agree that if there be even ten people seeking God that God will spare the city, (Gen 18:32). And in Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 1, God says, "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city." Talk about a place of empowerment. When we seek God, God forgives not only us, but is patient in waiting that others might come to believe. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth. In living lives of repentance, we preserve the earth. Because we point others towards God. Paul says to us today: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." Paul's life lived in repentance became an example so that others would come to believe in Jesus and receive eternal life. He teaches this truth also to Timothy saying: "Watch your life and

doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (I Timothy 4:16).

Jesus says to us today that there is much rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. And who is it that is rejoicing in heaven? The rejoicing is said to be done in the presence of angels, and so it is not only the angels, or the scripture would tell us the angels rejoice over one sinner who repents. And I believe the ones who are rejoicing are those who have gone before us. Including the believers who died when the towers fell. They are rooting for us because it matters. They win in seeing us win. They are not experiencing a senseless uninvolved existence, they are watching and rejoicing to see us succeed (Hebrews 12:1) so that we bring others alongside of us and them with Jesus when he comes again triumphantly to reign on earth. And we succeed by walking in obedience to God. Jesus says to us, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not the things that I say?” (Lk 6:46). There is a repentance unto salvation but there is also an ongoing repentance in our walk that trains us up into godliness. This is why Jesus explains to us that though we have been washed clean, we need to continue to wash our feet (Jn 13:10). Our walk is a walk of obeying God. We pray each Sunday, “Thy will be done.” And where is it that we would have God’s will be done if not in us? Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commands,” (Jn 14:15). And when we fall short of this nonsense commandment, we repent and turn back towards God that God may grow us up into godliness so that we bear much fruit. This is our responsibility. To not be blind to our own sin, and to not water down God’s words, and to not trample the blood that has been spilled for us (Heb 10:29), but to walk in repentance redeeming the time because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:16). Amen.