

August 15, 2010 Pentecost 11 C

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Why are you here? What do you want? Inner peace? Rest from the weariness of the world? Some people live alone, and they come for a break from constant loneliness. Some are curious in a skeptical sort of way. Some want music that soothes, or lifts the heart, or brings back wistful memories. There is nothing inherently wrong with such desires.

Why are you here? Are you hoping for a sermon that is just long enough and just abstract enough to allow you to get in a good daydream? I think it's just about now that the daydreaming starts. Enjoy the scenery. See you in 14 minutes.

Are you here to be challenged? Did you come here to be accused? I can promise you there are people right here who LIKE a church service that gets them feeling good and guilty, so they can leave here feeling virtuous for having faced the music. Who benefits from that?

I'm not just asking about us, sitting here. It is easy to see that lots of people are interested. Everywhere we see signs of people wanting to live close to God.

There are any number of popular books on spirituality. There are retreat centers and ashrams, and there are self-help groups, twelve step groups, there are Hindu temples and Buddhist meditation centers. There are sweat lodges and fat farms and herbal spas that all offer some type of wholeness or enlightenment, or at least quiet time. The quiet time seems like worship because there are Native American flutes playing on the sound track. Someone wants to build a Mosque at Ground Zero. Interest in worship and meditation abounds.

There are all sorts of ways to be spiritual. Most religious practices bear a lot of similarities: prayer, meditation, learning some wise or inspiring words, gathering with like-minded people. It all looks alike. IS it really alike? Different shades of the same color? Or are they instances of real differences hidden by camouflage? Think of the way that a Muskie can look like a Northern Pike. The way a poisonous toadstool resembles an edible mushroom. The way straw can look a bit like wheat.

God asks "What has straw in common with wheat?"

It's a well worded question. You could say the two are similar. Straw and wheat. Tall grass. Farm raised. Tawny golden color.

But we know they are also completely different. Wheat is nutritious. Wheat is food. Wheat can germinate and create another crop of wheat.

Straw is not food at all. It has no nutrition. You cannot plant straw and expect it to grow. Straw is not kept in a secure granary, but spread all over the barn floor. It is expendable. Straw is not a beginning, but an end. Wheat has a future.

Jeremiah is standing on his soap box saying what is dangerous to say; that there is such a thing as true worship and such a thing as false worship.

Dangerous to say it because of all the objections it raises. What about religious freedom? Are we not in favor of allowing the conscience to be free? Of course we are, so people can worship from the convictions of the heart. Yes, we should treasure that freedom, even if it fosters a maddening complexity.

Is one religion better than another? Careful... With that long history of abusive colonialism that went hand in hand with Christian mission, we Christians are at risk of sounding arrogant and self-serving.

But even as we wish for a world in harmony, we deplore those efforts that try to get everyone under some other roof. We cannot stomach the brand of Islam that will not allow creative expression or freedom of conscience. But the wise person will not assume that a Christian Taliban would be any better than a Moslem one.

What do we do, -we the tolerant and enlightened, -with the claim that there is True worship and False worship: True God and false gods?

God says "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" Did you know that God is sometimes sarcastic? "I have dreamed, I have dreamed." God is pouring scorn on Holy People who speak of their own mystical musings.

God is sarcastic! After that, God sounds weary. "How long?"

God is asking how long will people listen to the wrong voices, How long will the false prophets keep babbling? God is not looking for a number. God is speaking lament.

A God who laments is a God who yearns. God yearns for a people to listen.

God is enduring rejection like a spurned lover who wants the beloved to return. That yearning is for you.

Jeremiah has two main messages: Worship the One True God, and Do Justice. That two-point message is hammered home again and again in the book of Jeremiah.

Israel was not practicing justice. Through the preaching of Jeremiah God spells out that a nation is judged by how it treats the poor, the vulnerable, the lowly, the weak. God criticizes those who do not pay fair wages to workers. God chastises those who do not provide for widows, orphans, and the poor. God rails against those who mistreat foreigners who are living in the land. Take note America. God chastises those who mistreat foreigners.

Worship that is chaff is the kind that gives you nice bedding. Worship that is wheat is not an end in itself. Lots of soothing mystical practices feel wonderful. Jeremiah is telling us that if the practice only helps me and not my neighbor then it is idolatry.

There is a key to unlocking the question of what is true or false: What is wheat and what is straw. Ask yourself. Who is all this for? Not just why you are here, but FOR WHOM?

Even the atheist can find a reason to be RESPECTFUL of the neighbor, but that is an ethic that can be practiced without a shred of real care.

God is out for more than mutual respect, more than live and let live. God is calling, yearning, challenging you and me to be a part of the kingdom where care for neighbor is not an addition to worship, but the extension of worship- prayers projected into the acts of daily life. Projected into the way we budget, the way we volunteer, even the way we structure our prayers and our songs.

The thing about the True God is that the True God is annoying. The True God pokes and prods and broods, and watches whether we remember to share, and yearns for us to listen to the still small voice.

This past week our 8th graders went on a canoe trip in Northern Wisconsin. Our outfitter was Camp Amnicon. A Lutheran Bible camp kept well hidden in northern Wisconsin.

Each member of the group received a Chi Rho- a symbol for Christ. It is two Greek letters superimposed together. It forms a kind of alphabetical crucifix. It stands for Christ, but it means Christ crucified.

Each one in that canoe group received a call to wear this symbol as a daily reminder of the wonders of God's creation, and of the nearness of God's love.

When we consider the cross, we know first -that it is easy to believe that a man was put to death by a brutal government in cahoots with the false prophets of the day.

Christ died. Died by an injustice. Knowing this plants in us the seed of sympathy. It plants the seed of a love that is willing to give. The Word of God begins to crack the rock of indifference. It is a hammer that is surely re-shaping the world because it is wheat and not straw.

God is still speaking. Jeremiah's dread words became scripture partly because in the long view of hindsight the people of Israel saw that Jeremiah was right- while others said Israel was doing fine, Jeremiah said Israel would fall. It did not seem reasonable at the time, but it came to pass.

So too, the promises. God is reconciling the world to himself through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Maybe not always apparent, but yet true. This is wheat. This world is going somewhere in God's hands.

God is near. And the story is your story. And you are not just here, you are going somewhere, because the Word of God is near you.