

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 7:1-11
November 23, 2014
Pastor Chris Bellefeuille

I am wondering: Does this happen to you? Where sometimes you feel so engaged in our democracy and other times you feel completely detached from it, looking on in wonder and then thankfully turning the channel or snapping off the radio. This happened to me recently with such abruptness I experience ideological whiplash.

This fall, a great bunch of us were out knocking on doors and working the phones to get people to vote for racial equity, economic dignity and community investment. Along with other trembling souls, I knocked on doors in Golden Valley and in North Minneapolis. I planned my election day carefully so I had time to vote. I stayed up late watching the returns and woke early to check the newspaper. Then this past Monday night our group of intrepid door knockers gathered at a restaurant to heave a great sigh of relief that we could resume our view from the sidelines for a while and to marvel at our audacity at doing something most of us had never done before. Even though the emails have already started filling our inboxes with next meeting and next steps to hold our newly elected official accountable to the values we uphold.

Then Thursday night our president, like several before him, took to the airwaves to announce an executive action on immigration. Before he even uttered the last word a firestorm erupted: people elated, people disappointed and politicians threatening government shut down or impeachment. It set me back on my heels and I found firmly in the role of observer. I don't entirely know what to think. We all agree that our country is in need of immigration reform. Beyond that, what is the right thing to do? Was executive action the right thing? Maybe. Maybe

not. Is it impeachment worthy? I don't know. I don't know constitutional law. I do know that the answer is NOT legislative gridlock over other critical issues in order to punish the president for this one issue. But beyond that, I find myself completely stymied.

I bring this up not to agitate you over immigration or the president or the use of executive action. I bring it up because it feels like a real life example of what Jeremiah is struggling with in his temple speech in chapter 7. It may seem like a stretch but here is how I see it.

We Americans, especially those of us born here, love our freedoms. We love the right to speech and freedom of religion. Especially during hunting season, we love the right to bear arms. We live where we want. We drive the cars we want and we drive a lot of them. We can wear t-shirts bearing slogans we want the world to see. We cheer when "our side" is winning in the legislature or at the polls. We are terrific at supporting the actions of the people we voted for and we are pretty terrific at castigating the actions of those for whom we did not vote. Because in our country, we can voice our opinion without fear of legal reprisal.

But we get it all tangled up. Let's say that President Obama overstepped his bounds. Did Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell any less over step his by firing a threatening salvo? Is this what they think we want? Fighting that shuts down the government and stops us from moving forward on immigration reform or anything else for that matter?

You see, we are terrific at wielding power but we are not so terrific at subjecting to it. We like government that works for us. But we don't much like government that expects us to work for it. We want good roads and we hate paying taxes. We want our kids to get a good education but chafe at what is demanded of us to keep our classrooms equitable for all. We want what we

want and what we DON'T want is to be subject to anyone, anything or any institution. At least, that is what it looks like if you read the papers or watch the news.

Jeremiah delivers his temple speech to a people on the brink. There has been a regime change. One enemy is on the wane, another on the rise. Jerusalem is under threat and the people are claiming that the God of heaven will shield them from harm and protect them from their enemies. They claim that Jerusalem will not fall because God will protect Zion. This is certainly a bold claim and might sound like a faithful one. But I don't think so.

Just as Micah did, Jeremiah is calling the people to account. The people are making claims on God's promises without being obedient to God's commandments. They are out and about behaving as they wish, neglecting to do justice for their neighbors, violating God's commands and then running back to the temple like a safety base in a game of tag. "Hah! Now that I'm here no one can touch me."

The people want the status and security they assume as people of God. They come to their beautiful temple on the high place with piety: bringing offerings and singing hymns while dressed in finery. All the while neglecting the resident immigrants, the parentless, the widows. They want what they want and what they DON'T want is to be held account to anyone or anything that has a claim on them.

One seminary professor offers us a modern example of our similar reluctance. We struggle with our relationship with the Bible. We look to the bible for encouragement and comfort and we even fairly willingly accept a gentle exhortation to justice. But we risk limiting the bible to an object for study. We strive to be authorities over the bible and resist standing under the bible's

authority which is where we belong, which is where our Lutheran confessions firmly place us.

(Schifferdecker ILTTTS Podcast) Like the people in the temple, we are more content to lay claim to Scripture that we are to let it have a claim on us.

So when we claim to know what the bible is saying, whether as a false prophet, an unfaithful interpreter or a faithful mis-interpreter, we risk making ourselves as the lord of God's word by trying to make the bible mean what we want it to mean. This is the natural result of us trying to be lords not just of scripture but of our own lives. We are especially good at that. We want to call ourselves disciples of Jesus and still expect that we can be lords of our own lives. We want what we want.

This is what Jeremiah is trying to make the people understand. They run to the door of the temple and claim safety when what God is asking them to do is be obedient and do justice. There is a line in here that says "Amend your ways and your doings and let me dwell with you in this place." It sounds like the presence of God is being offered as a reward for obedience. But the Hebrew reads differently than that. If the people of God live faithfully, if they amend their ways then the Lord can dwell with them in the temple, in Jerusalem, in the land that God gave them. But if they are NOT obedient, the enemy will break them because injustice destroys everyone and makes them vulnerable. God will never cease to dwell with them but if they fail to obey, it won't this place they claim as their safety base.

They are laying claims to God without letting God lay a claim on them. Their strength as a people doesn't come from the mere existence of God. God will not shield them from their enemies. That's right. Jeremiah is telling them that God will not shield them from their enemies

just because God is God. Their only real defense comes in relationship and obedience to God's call to create a community that strengthens everyone, especially the resident alien, the orphan and the widow. Then and only then will the people of God stand stalwart against the enemy at the gate.

So, we are back to the beginning. We like to make claims. But we do not like claims made on us. Would it be possible for us to find hope in the fact that there is an authority that lies outside of ourselves? That we are not the final arbiters on what it is to be people of God or citizens of the United States.

There is an authority outside of us. And while it may not seem like it to our 21st century sensibilities, that is really good news. Hundreds of years ago our country broke with a monarchy in defense of liberty. For hundreds of years we have been clear that we don't like being subject to any ruler, any king. But today we who call ourselves disciples celebrate that we are subject to the claims of a king whose idea of kingship is to offer his own life so that we can be truly free. Free to lean into the claims the Word of God makes on us; claims that draw us into a stronger, more life-giving community. Claims that give us room to live and move and have our being. Sometimes it is really okay not to be in charge. Sometimes it really is okay not to vigilantly guard barriers that God did not construct but to walk hand in hand with the people God has given us to love and to serve and make a better way together. Amen