

COMMONWELLTH

By
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From the Pulpit of
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Jeremiah 22:13-19

¹³Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; ¹⁴who says, “I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,” and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. ¹⁵Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. ¹⁶He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. ¹⁷But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence. ¹⁸Therefore thus says the Lord concerning King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: They shall not lament for him, saying, “Alas, my brother!” or “Alas, sister!” They shall not lament for him, saying, “Alas, lord!” or “Alas, his majesty!” ¹⁹With the burial of a donkey

he shall be buried— dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

Luke 4:16-30

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

How might we describe our first scripture reading today? A passage from an unsettling time over 2600 years ago where a religious leader is highly critical of the priorities of the highest public official, who shows himself to be more interested in the fancy decorations where he lives than in doing what is just and right through addressing the needs of the poor and needy. When we check the context of the passage, we realize that earlier in the same 22nd chapter in Jeremiah, that the prophet identifies those who are most vulnerable as the alien, the orphan, and the widow, and the passage sounds like it is from not so long ago and far away. Sort of feels like there is an elephant in the room, because it can be uncomfortable to talk about political issues in a church setting, where many feel like the church should stay neutral in these kinds of things. We can call that elephant number one.

One of my spiritual heroes was Desmond Tutu, a leader of the Anglican church in South Africa, who courageously fought against the apartheid policies that defined the government until the mid-1990's. As Tutu was looking for allies to support civil rights for all, there were those who were trying to keep religious and political issues separate. With his eyes smiling, Tutu would say to them, "If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." ¹ Elephant number two helps us understand that when the church is 'neutral' regarding what may be unjust or compassionless public policies, then in its silence, it is actually supporting what the political heavies are doing even as it ignores the painful plight of each little mouse. I have to imagine that King Jehoiakim, whose policies and priorities were being criticized by Jeremiah, would have liked to have told the religious leader that he should stay neutral regarding public policies. I imagine that years before that, the Egyptian Pharaoh would have also said the same to

Moses about staying neutral regarding the economic structure built on the backs of Hebrew slaves. Obviously, neither Moses nor Jeremiah were called to neutrality.

So, what is the role of the church in these days when there are public policies being put in place that particularly impact those who are among the most vulnerable? Believe it or not, I think there is a third elephant that might help us discern a part of our role. Seventy years ago, there was a story of an elephant told in rhyme and illustrations called “Horton Hears a Who,” that was written by Dr. Seuss. Now, stay with me here. I view the story as being even more timely than when it was first published. Horton is an elephant with large ears, so he has an ability to hear that which others cannot, which in this case are the cries of distress from people so very small that none of the other animals in the jungle even realize that they exist. Once Horton discovers the presence of these tiny vulnerable Whos, he takes responsibility for their wellbeing, and he places the Whos of Whoville where he expects they will be safe.

But as Horton begins to express his concerns for these tiny Whos, the other animals in the jungle, not wanting to be bothered by such a possibility, begin to ridicule him for his belief that beings so small merit any attention or care. In fact, these other animals actually exaggerate their behaviors that are hurting the Whos as they express their incredulity that Horton believes such small matters matter. These other animals are much more interested in what they think would enhance their own individual lives than in what is right and fair for all. Some of the animals then cruelly snatch the Whos away to place them where it is thought that their chief advocate, Horton, could never find them. But Horton has a big heart to match his big ears, so with diligent searching, he finally finds them.

When he does, he cries out with great relief and urgency, “My friends! Tell me! Do tell! Are you safe? Are you sound? Are you whole? Are you well?”²

Twice in our Jeremiah passage today, the prophet says, “It was well,” when certain conditions existed under a previous ruler. The word that is translated ‘well,’ is not a narrow one. Jeremiah says it was well for the king, which was King Josiah, and it was well for the kingdom when he ruled with a focus on what was just and right, with special attention to those who were poor and needy. We are located in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, one of four states that uses that term that sets a vision that frankly has not yet been met. The term dates from the 15th Century coming from the old meaning of ‘wealth’ which is ‘wellbeing,’ so commonwealth has the wellbeing of all as its guiding principle.³ I’ve purposely misspelled my sermon title with a w-e-l-l-t-h as we explore the vision of common wellbeing defined by all folks being what Horton asked about: safe, sound, whole, and well. A consistent theme across scripture asserts that when a society ignores or exacerbates the needs of those on the fringes, then that society is not spiritually well.

Slightly over six centuries after Jeremiah was written, we hear Luke’s account of Jesus coming back to Nazareth to teach in his hometown synagogue. He chooses a text from Isaiah to serve as his mission statement that is in accord with what we heard from Jeremiah. In the reading, God’s messenger is described as bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, a liberation of the oppressed. After reading that text, Jesus proclaims that God’s stated purpose or God’s reign was being fulfilled in their presence. The first response among the synagogue crowd was positive – I can

imagine people giving his mother, Mary, a big thumb's up – hometown boy did well! The people of Nazareth swelled with pride in their native son. That went along with a bit of pride in themselves, as God's chosen people. Their understanding of being selected by God was that they had special divine favor that should be coming their way. Jesus indicated that God had chosen Israel, but had chosen them to be a special blessing to others, because God's broad and deep love embraces all people. To illustrate his point, Jesus employs a couple of stories from scripture about God's loving care extending beyond the Hebrew people to needy Gentiles. Hold on now! The hometown crowd quickly turns on Jesus with such ferocity that his life is put at risk. The idea of just and right relationships may sound fine when described narrowly or abstractly, but when the ramifications of the breadth of God's love gets spelled out, that challenges the comfort zone of the faithful.

Now we don't live under King Jehoiakim. Neither are we synagogue members in Nazareth. But we have a lot in common with the Nazareth synagogue crowd. We are proud of Jesus. Some have Muhammad, others have Buddha, but we have Jesus, and aren't we glad he's ours. But Jesus didn't call us to be disciples in order that we might feel like we were chosen or favored by God over others, where we expect a monopoly on God's material blessings and can ignore everyone else. Jeremiah, for his part, carries forth a scriptural legacy focused on the needs of aliens who lived in their midst because the immigration policy allowed them to be among the most vulnerable to have been exploited. He focused on widows and orphans as those who in that context had great difficulty having their basic needs of food, shelter and healthcare met. Those who have those unmet needs today, whatever the cause, would seem to be those toward whom Jeremiah and Jesus direct us.

We could live, with lukewarm detached contentment in our society of vast inequality and increasing cruelty, but Jeremiah and Jesus point us toward God's good intent for a broad wellness, a commonwellth for ourselves and for everyone else. We, as the church, are not called to partisanship, but neither are we called to neutrality regarding the needs of the most vulnerable, because love for our neighbor leads us to work that all might be safe, sound, whole, and well.

Are you interested in how the Horton story ends? The elephant encourages the little Whos to raise their own voices in unison so the animals in the jungle can for the first time hear their expressions of dignity and hope. Wondrously, that ends the wave of disregard and cruelty so that a new sense of commonwellth transforms the jungle. That book is, of course, classified as fiction. Our society is more complicated. But, I wonder if we can take the qualities of Horton, Jeremiah, and Jesus to guide us in rewriting the current narrative into a non-fiction account of those who elevated and worked toward a hope-filled vision of commonwellth. It might well lead to it being well for our identity as part of the church of Jesus Christ and for it being well for all within God's broad, loving reign. I hope that will be a significant part of our story!

Amen.

¹ Desmond Tutu, quoted in Robert McAfee Brown's book, Unexpected News, published in 1984.

² Theodor Suess Geisel, Horton Hears a Who, Random House, 1954.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth>