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Pilgrim Congregational Church
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PROPHETS AND LOVERS

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30
I Corinthians 13:1-13

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Two prophets - Jeremiah and Jesus - and a passage for lovers. What might we weave from today's lessons? First, a hunch that these passages offer a lot more than we usually make of them: Jeremiah's call was more than a good text for a minister's ordination; Jesus' difficulty in Nazareth was more than a warning on hometown preaching; and Paul's words were hardly meant *only* as a wedding text. I found myself stretched by them in some new ways this week.

Taken together, today's readings challenge our basic life values. When we're pushed beyond our conventional values, how will we respond? How do we discern God's purposes anyway? How can we know we're "called by God," not by our own desires? We begin with young Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. We watch what happens to Jesus when he claims God's love includes "outsiders." We hear Paul describe love as nothing less than the governing norm for religion, indeed, *all* of life.

Sunday School taught many of us that prophets were old men with long gray hair and flowing beards, who spoke from high atop a desert rock, crowds below hanging on their every word. Jeremiah was quite the opposite when he was called, indeed, as a young person *too* young to be respected as one with authority. He would have been dismissed quickly as "just a young fellow." But God could be a God of many paradoxes. In Jeremiah, not only did God call a young person to be prophet; God called him specifically to speak with authority: *God's* words would speak from his mouth as he challenged established authority and conventional popular opinion.

Jeremiah's call came in the midst of a restless, uncertain time not unlike our own. The old world order, for two centuries held together by powerful Assyria, was now crumbling. Egypt and Babylon now both coveted Judah, the strategic little state between the two new powers. In this setting, Jeremiah, prophet of Yahweh, messed with politics time and again, condemning Judah's injustice and idolatry, warning that unless it radically changed, returning to its covenant with God, unless its people radically changed *their* ways and stopped whoring after false gods and oppressing the poor, disaster would strike. Not surprisingly, he was first ignored, then condemned a traitor. His was a costly calling.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' public ministry essentially began in the Nazareth synagogue. Last week we heard the home-town folks praise this young carpenter as he read Isaiah's promise of good news for the poor, release for the captive, and sight for the blind. Then Jesus announced that those words were fulfilled in their hearing. But he knew right away they'd missed his point. They nodded and smiled, oblivious to the radical truth he spoke. Then he made it too blunt to miss, reminding them that prophets were rejected at home and foreigners actually *could* be more acceptable to God than even the very people of God themselves. Worst of all, he refused to show off his miracle powers to boost civic pride. (Not *every* town could boast a miracle worker!)

The smiles faded. Home-town pride swiftly turned to rage. Suddenly they were chasing this favorite son to the cliff outside town, from which they fully intended to throw him to his death. You see, the Nazarenes were happy to have one of their own become a respected teacher, happier still if he'd work a miracle or two for them, but they were *not* ready to hear a prophet call them to repent and fundamentally change their lives.

The people of seventh century Judah and first century Nazareth both needed prophets. They may have preferred some minor reforms and miraculous deeds, but they *needed* a prophet! In 1995 we hear calls to reform *our* political systems. Those reforms may well be quite necessary. Might we, too, also need a prophet's voice to call *us* to a still more fundamental reordering of our individual and national priorities?

Are we, like the Nazarenes, satisfied with reforms that remain based on *conventional* values? Do we continue to search for our salvation in ever-new technology - now it is Toffler's "third wave" that is venerated. Would we solve our communal issues only through more individual freedom, leaving the powerless free to twist in the wind? Would we offer economic security only through competition unfettered by any sense of responsibility? Would we assure our material abundance by exploiting our envimonment with no thought of our future generations? Might we benefit from prophetic words that fundamentally and *unconventionally* challenge what we're about?

Last fall, for example, crime was a hot topic. Candidates outdid each other with promises to "get tough," lock up criminals and throw the key away, and sentence more to death. But our prison population continues to grow with no decrease in crime projected. *Might* we need to hear the unpopular suggestion that distorted but prevailing assumptions of freedom (such as "I have the 'right' to whatever I want.") actually can lead to violence? Or that broken communities - families, neighborhoods, institutions of every kind - lead to crime, and creating a sense of responsibility to one another need become a top priority. Or if we really wish safer communities, we *all* have to change. Of course, just as in the time of Jeremiah and Jesus, plenty of would-be prophets ask us to take sides on the issues before us. As people claimed by a particular faith journey, how will *we* respond?

Here Paul's words might guide us well. Unfortunately, sometimes familiarity breeds distraction. Rightly we think of I Corinthians 13 as a magnificent description of love. Too often, though, I'm

afraid we hear it only in the context of a wedding service. As much as I like to use it there as the basis of the love claimed by lovers entering marriage, to leave it there totally misses the mark. Certainly the *last* thing Paul had in mind when he wrote those words was a wedding service!

He was writing those all but fatally conflicted Corinthian Christians that if they were to survive as a people of Christ, if Jesus were to be a living presence in their midst, faith was important, but not enough; hope was important, but not enough. What was *most* essential was that *they be lovers* - not the romantic lovers of pop culture, but the deeper stuff of being committed to one another in all circumstances, in living not for oneself alone, but for the whole.

For Paul, love always was found in life that insisted not on its own way, was self-giving, never self-serving. They could be wonder-workers who produced astounding miracles; they could speak sublime wisdom; they could give away all their lavish possessions - but if they did these out of any motive other than love - the well-being of your neighbor being *your* well-being, it was all for nothing.

Prophets and lovers. To paraphrase the old song, you can't be one without the other! Jeremiah's prophecies were validated because he risked living out of a deep love for his people, a love that challenged the status quo, calling them to find life by loving God and one another, according to the covenant of old. Jesus healed only out of compassion, not to enhance his hometown reputation - nor even to save his skin before Pilate! And he challenged his Nazareth neighbors to expand their vision to understand God's love included foreigners *they* assumed were far beyond the pale. And Paul's words on love in truth were as toughly prophetic as any in the Bible!

Remember, too, the prophets were not religious professionals. Anything *but*! They were women and men who heard God's call to speak the truth boldly. Truth tempered by love, motivated *not* by anger, *not* by frustration, *not* by wanting to be front and center. It was God's deep compassion for those who suffered that put words in their mouths. Might this same God put words and deeds of love into *our* lives? Might not a modest miracle or two be our reward for loving our neighbor as ourselves? *Prophets and lovers* - by the grace of God, that might even describe you and me! Amen.