

**A Jeremiah Church**  
4 Epiphany, Year C, 2010  
January 31, 2010

I want to be a Jeremiah person. I want you to be a Jeremiah person. I want our church to be a Jeremiah church.

So what does that mean? Here's what the prophet Jeremiah writes about how he got started: <sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, <sup>5</sup>"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." <sup>6</sup>Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." <sup>7</sup>But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, <sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

We can relate to Jeremiah. He felt poorly equipped for the work God called him to do. He had good excuses. He was too young and inexperienced. He didn't have the gifts he needed for the work God was calling him to do. But God wasn't interested in Jeremiah's excuses. He had confidence in his selection.

Jeremiah -- in spite of his concerns and doubts about his ability to serve -- faithfully set about doing what God asked of him. That's the kind of person I want to be, the kind of person I want you to be, the kind of church I want Intercession to be.

And just what did God want Jeremiah to do? Well, Jeremiah was asked to carry an unwelcomed message to Israel -- repent, that is, get your act together before God -- or be destroyed. Not a popular message. But it was a message the people desperately needed to hear. Maybe our message: that there is a powerful, loving, healing, forgiving, renewing God who wants to become a part of your life -- amazingly there are a lot of people who don't want to hear that message. Or maybe we think that, and we're afraid to share that message. But it is a message we are called to give.

So, what happened to Jeremiah? God's personal prediction to Jeremiah was this: "*Attack you they will, but overcome you they can't,*" (Jer 1:19) and this promise was fulfilled many times in the Biblical narrative as Jeremiah warned of destruction of those who continued to refuse repentance and accept more moderate consequences. In return for his adherence to God's disciplines and speaking God's words, Jeremiah was attacked by his own brothers, (Jer 12:6) beaten and put into the stocks by a priest and false prophet (Jer 20:1-4), imprisoned by the king, (Jer 37:18, 38:28), threatened with death (Jer 38:4), thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials(Jer 38:6), and opposed by a false prophet (Jer 28) Yet God was faithful to rescue Jeremiah from his enemies.

Now maybe we're backing away, even as we hear this. "I'm not equipped like Jeremiah was ... "Oh really? "Sure, sure, I know Jeremiah complained about being too young, about not being eloquent enough, but look what he did ... that's too much to ask of me, to ask of our church."

What it all boils down to is spiritual gifts ... what God has given us to equip and prepare and mobilize us for ministry? God gave spiritual gifts to Jeremiah. That was part of the "consecration" and "appointing" that God did with him.

Our protests are like Jeremiah's: "I don't know enough." "Frankly, my faith isn't strong enough." But God will have none of that -- he has given us the gifts we need to do his work. Every one of us.

We've had readings about spiritual gifts the past two weeks from the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Those readings continue today with chapter 13, which is really a continuation of chapter 12. It is unfortunate that this chapter -- the so-called love chapter -- is so often read by itself.

Let's review the end of chapter 12 briefly. Paul talks about the powerful spiritual gifts -- gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the church. He mentions being an apostle or a prophet, teaching, leadership, healing, speaking in tongues. These are all very powerful and awe inspiring things. Very evident, rare. But then surprisingly, he ends that chapter with these words ... "*But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a more excellent way.*"

Being an apostle, prophet, teacher, healer, leader -- great. But Paul says there are even greater gifts than these, gifts that provide a more excellent way of building up the church.

And then he goes into this long discussion about love. You see, love is a spiritual gift. A gift from the Holy Spirit to us. And Paul tells us that the most powerful of all the spiritual gifts, the greatest gift -- he says it right at the end of chapter 13: *the greatest of these is love.*

I've devoted quite a lot of thinking about the intersection of faith and science, as you know. About knowledge and faith. There's a huge debate going on in our culture about this. And yet Paul – in our lesson today, chapter 13, verse 2, says that I may have all the knowledge in the world and I may even have all the faith in the world, but if I don't have love it's nothing.

If I have all faith and I have all knowledge, but I don't have love ... then I am nothing. I can tell you that it wasn't knowledge that propelled the hands that dug through the rubble in Haiti, though knowledge helped. It wasn't even faith that drove people to risk danger in digging into collapsed buildings, although faith has had a lot to do with the rescue in Haiti. What propelled those hands was love. Love of God and love of his people.

Maybe we don't realize the power of the gift of love because of its very nature. Love is not attention-getting, it's not headline making, it's not controlling over nations or people. Paul tells us that – in contrast – love is patient and kind, not boastful or arrogant, it isn't pushy or loud.

Love is not in-your-face loud and taking-over. And yet love is the most important gift. I can tell you that when you look back on your life – maybe you will see this with more clarity only when you get to the end of your life – but when you look back, what will really matter most will not be how much money you made, or how much prestige you got, or how good looking or witty or powerful you were. What will matter most is how love entered your life. What will be most important is those people you have loved and those people who have loved you.

Now, as you all know, I will be retiring from Intercession in mid April. But I haven't talked about this much. I haven't wanted my retirement plans to be a distraction from more important things, but also maybe I haven't talked about it much because it's very emotional for me. Because you see, I have received an amazing amount of love from you. It has deeply touched my life. This church has a lot of love in it. God has already given Intercession a massive dose of the most powerful and important spiritual gift – love.

I've seen your love – last week's generous contributions to Haiti relief were just one recent example. We have love and if we have love, we as a church do not need anything else.

Yet, as we look at Intercession today, it's tempting to see a lot of problems. We don't have enough money. We have a maintenance-intensive facility that's eating us alive. We don't have enough volunteers for keeping the church maintained. We are not growing. These are not problems – they are only symptoms of a problem. You see we have love, and that love has been lavishly offered in many ways. But too often our love has not been focused outward from ourselves, from our own small community. What our problem is is this: too often we have not allowed our love to be turned into action.

Love in action – Love that's powerful will overcome reticence, shyness, lack of confidence, and invite others to church. The same love that propelled hands to dig through dangerous rubble will propel you to be a witness for Christ out there, in your community.

How many of you know someone who doesn't go to church? You probably know many such people. But just think of one right now. See his or her face. You care for that person, don't you? You love that person, don't you? But how many of you invited that person to church this week? Doesn't that person need God? Doesn't that person need a faith community that supports and loves and enables them? Yes, they do. Wouldn't it be an amazing act of love to bring that person into this community? That's love in action, love pointed outward. I can try to shame, intimidate, cajole you into telling others about your faith, inviting them to church – but unless you do it out of love, using that powerful greatest that God has given you, then it doesn't mean a thing ... it is, as Paul says, nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Now the word of the LORD came to the Church of the Intercession, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a church to serve all the people.” <sup>6</sup>Then we said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for we are only a small church.” <sup>7</sup>But the LORD said to use, “Do not say, ‘we are only a small church; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, <sup>8</sup>Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

I want to be a Jeremiah person. I want you to be a Jeremiah person. I want our church to be a Jeremiah church. God has consecrated and appointed us for ministry as his church -- I believe that God has given us the greatest of gifts that we may do this. And he expects us to follow through. Now. Amen.

-- Fr. Jim Trainor