

"It's Not All Kumbaya and Roses"
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56
August 14, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
Jonathan Shively, preacher

This past Tuesday, seven Chicagoans had murder convictions overturned. Six men and one woman: Carlos Andino, Alfred Gonzalez, David Lugo, Jaime Rios, Marilyn Mulero, Nelson Gonzalez, Johnny Flores. Five of them had already completed their sentences and two were finally released from prison. They collectively had served 174 years in prison, nearly 25 years apiece.

Their dismissed convictions helped them join 29 other people who previously had their convictions vacated. All were victims of the misconduct of Chicago police officer Reynaldo Guevara and his colleagues, who, according to BuzzFeed reporter Melissa Segura, "had coaxed witnesses into making false identifications, pressured child witnesses into pointing out the wrong suspects, invented anonymous tips, and battered suspects into making false statements."

Families and justice system advocates had fought for years to prove their innocence and earn their release. Of course the years of incarceration cannot be given back. The time lost is irreplaceable. The damage caused by Mr. Guevara's abhorrent actions cannot be undone.

But some form of delayed justice is being served. Our "system" is doing the best it can given the horrendous circumstances. Twice again as many victims of Mr. Guevara still have futures held in the balance. Perhaps they, too, will be given a reprieve.

Justice is hard. Meting out justice is a tremendous responsibility. Building a case for the execution of justice requires impeccable integrity and trust.

Unfortunately, human justice can get it wrong. Our deeply held convictions, personal viewpoints, blind spots, biases, self-centeredness, pride, and any other number of characteristics and tendencies contribute to our misfiring on justice.

We also know that justice can be manipulated and its very foundations distorted. We don't know what was going on in Mr. Guevara's mind and heart when he was falsifying the cases of so many citizens, but he was certainly falling far from the standard of justice. Simply

put, he did not demonstrate righteousness, equitableness, or moral rightness by any measure.

As followers of Jesus, we have been schooled in these qualities of justice: righteousness, equity, and morality. We expect them of each other, and we expect them of God. Sometimes, too, we expect them from our neighbors, colleagues, friends, and leaders. I think we sometimes expect justice to bring peace and serve unity, expecting that God's posture is to eliminate the conflict and struggle which moral decision-making presents.

We want to be clear about who is right and who is wrong. We want doubt eliminated from our lexicon. We want to gather around the campfire and sing Kumbaya. We want to be the recipient of bouquets of fresh roses. We want the presence of Jesus in our lives to manifest peace, love, and rock and roll. Well, at least peace and love.

So today's scripture passages are pretty jarring. They're kind of like expecting a nice sweet dessert and then biting into something that is savory or spicy. In fact, if I were a smarter guest preacher I would have found some easier texts to preach on this morning! You might wish I had chosen another one as well.

Let's start with Jeremiah's report. (All similarities to any of today's news headlines are purely coincidental.) God is not pleased at all with those who are prophesying in his name. Those prophets are telling lies, the Lord says. They are offering the deceit of their own hearts, representing it as God's desire. These prophets seem to have a conspiracy going: they are sharing dreams with the people that are designed to make God's people forget who God is.

I think we understand the power of dreams. In fact one of the most powerful rhetorical moments in our nation's history was framed as a dream. "I have a dream," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. intoned.

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

And yet for the people of Israel at the moment of Jeremiah, the dreams were taking people away from God. Rather than drawing people toward a vision of God, they were causing them to forget who God is.

No doubt dream-casters have power. A tool of leadership is to cast dreams, to invite people to think of something in a new way, to envision an alternate future, to be open to a possibility that wasn't previously on the table.

I like to drop possibilities into conversations. They may seem pretty innocuous at first, they may even go unnoticed, but over time they take root and begin to grow. Another term for this type of dreaming is "seeding."

For instance, at Hands of Hope, we have a durable equipment lending closet. If people need a wheelchair, walker, toilet seat, shower chair, cane, crutches, etc, they give us a call and we loan it to them. When they're done they bring it back and we pass it along to someone else. People donate their used equipment to us so that it can be added to our Lending Closet.

This community service is a carry-over from our days as a hospice. The equipment used to go to our hospice patients. Anyone can borrow now. We're not the only ones in our

community that do this. Many township offices, senior services organizations, and health clinics have some medical supplies that they loan out or give away.

The lending closet isn't so much on point for our mission any more. We're a grief support agency, focused on helping people learn to live with a death loss. But we also believe that the lending closet is a vital community service. The dream is that it could be bigger and better if it were a stand-alone mission supported by a variety of different agencies, that we could have a greater impact if we worked together and brought our resources into focus with one another.

Oh, did I just share a dream? We will see what power it has in the next year or two.

Anyway, we know the potential of dreams and the casting of dreams. It can be for good or ill, and in the case of "for ill," God is not particularly charitable: Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces?"

The fire theme connects Jeremiah's challenge with Jesus' posture in Luke. At this moment in Luke, Jesus is not the patient, kind, accepting Savior that we tend to prefer. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

I imagine we can all relate to having some task to carry out that is burdensome and exhausting! It's just a bit jarring to hear JESUS describe the stress he is under: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" His frustration is exacerbated by the fact that those around him do not understand the purpose of his mission. Here the justice rolls down like a tsunami rather than that pastoral waterfall that we might prefer. Here the message is hard to swallow.

What does it mean that Jesus came to bring not peace but division to the earth? Was Jesus a 1st century Steve Bannon, on a hellacious mission to stir up discontent and form hardliner sides? Was Jesus really anti-family, an antagonist with little faith in the genetic and familial connections we share?

Our household is five: which two will be together, and which three, and which with Jesus? When a father turns against son, or son against father, is that a sign of Godliness? When a mother turns against daughter, or a daughter against mother, is that evidence that Jesus is working in their midst?

If that's the case, there must be a lot more Jesus in today's world than we give him credit for. After all, familial division is high. The divorce rate in the US in 2021 was projected at

45% (not the global leader, but not great). The stories of families divided over Covid 19 protocols, political loyalties, or culturally contested issues are mind-numbing. I'm going to guess that many of you have a story or two or three to tell.

We know division all-too-well.

But Jesus is not simply talking about differences of opinions, and he is not talking about actively subverting relationships simply to create chaos and confusion.

Rather, he is talking about the practical fall-out of being all-in as a follower of Jesus. To place one's loyalty with Jesus is to risk, well, everything, even family.

I have a friend who knows this reality first hand. They became a follower of Jesus and then they literally had to flee their family and country because their own life was in jeopardy.

In less dramatic ways this is happening now to faithful followers of Jesus. Our neighbors, friends and family may well not understand or value our commitment to Jesus. In a small act of spite, they may unfriend us on facebook. In a larger sign of the new division, they may no longer speak to us. In a more extreme situation, they may disparage or ridicule us. When it really gets out of control, we even see violence.

Both Jeremiah and Jesus were concerned with unfocused followers, followers who were distracted by dreams which undermined their faithfulness, and followers who were so out of focus that they were not understanding the times they lived in or the saving arrival of Jesus.

The metaphor Jesus uses is easy to understand: you see a cloud and you say it's going to rain; when the wind comes from the south you know it will be a scorcher. Jesus might give the weather forecasters more credit than they deserve (I often say that it's the only occupation where you can be wrong most of the time and still get a promotion!).

To pursue life in God's kingdom, to follow Jesus with faithfulness, challenges many of our notions of justice, peace, and righteousness. The primary follower feature is that focus is our fidelity: we are fixed on Jesus. Anything that distracts us from that focus is unjust. And when we are fixed on Jesus we are often not in control of what happens around us.

We might prefer to sing Kumbaya and lie on a bed of rose petals, but instead we have been called to be faithful to God and to follow Jesus. In that following, fixed on Jesus, justice

will unfold as part of the new earth and the new heavens. The Mr. Guevaras will be sorted out, and Carlos, Alfred, David, Jaime, Marilyn, Nelson, Johnny will be restored, and you and I will have our dreams and our faithfulness tested in holy fire.

Kumbaya, come by here, Lord, even with your fire.