

## On Prophetic Judgment

This is a sermon I offered again at my own Eighth Day Faith Community on September 11, 2005, the fourth anniversary of 9/11 and shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans down, revealing, for the first time to some Americans, the face of American poverty and the inadequacy of societal response. The question I explore is What is the nature of God's judgment? How does one make sense of an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah in today's world?

Bible Texts:

Jer 22:13-16

Matthew 18:21-35

The Gospel lesson today begins with Jesus' admonition that we are to forgive "70 times 7," (meaning an endless number of times). It then moves to the parable of the unforgiving servant, and ends with a merciless God handing us over to everlasting judgment (that is, *not* forgiving us) if we refuse to forgive others. This is a strange juxtaposition:

*we*

are to forgive indefinitely, but God's behavior is vindictive and God's mercy is dependent on our good behavior. God doesn't forgive even (apparently) once. What's going on?

While I don't want to make the scholars from the Jesus Seminar into the fount of absolute truth, their commentary on this passage makes sense to me. The Jesus Seminar, as most of you will know, is a group of established New Testament scholars who've taken on the task of discerning which words put into Jesus' mouth by Gospel writers were most likely actually spoken by the historical Jesus. They point out that what they consider the authentic sayings of Jesus—and their collective judgment is that this parable probably *was* spoken in some form by Jesus—are marked by exaggeration and ambiguity. They are stories that deliberately sow confusion in the listeners, forcing them to consider the story carefully so as not to be misled by too easy a conclusion.

Matthew, the Jesus seminar believes, *was* misled by Jesus' parable. While the majority of the scholars find the body of the parable authentic, they don't believe that Jesus uttered the last line that equates God with the punishing master. ("That's what my heavenly father will do to you, unless you find it in your heart to forgive each one of your brothers and sisters.") Rather, the scholars believe that it was Matthew himself who inserted that last line on the basis of his

understanding of Jesus' meaning. Jesus' parable, as the scholars understand it, tells a story contrasting forgiveness and lack of forgiveness and asks the listeners to puzzle over which belongs to the Kingdom of God. At the same time, however, the story demonstrates that "forgiveness cannot be compromised without undesirable consequences."

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In other words Jesus was not depicting God as vindictive and unmerciful. Jesus was suggesting that there are real-world consequences to our actions (in this case, the consequence of the servant's lack of forgiveness is the master's punishment), and we frequently interpret these consequences as the punishment of an angry God.

I'd like to think with you this morning about "real-world consequences" and try to avoid getting them confused with a vindictive God's punishment. Four years ago today the Twin Towers fell, the Pentagon was attacked, and a fourth plane probably headed for the White House or Capitol was downed in a Pennsylvania field. For the past two weeks we've been absorbed in the tragedy of Katrina and its aftermath. Both of these events speak deeply to our American situation, and it's important for us to discern carefully their meanings. Fred Taylor has, wisely, I think, characterized these twin tragedies as "bookends" of a powerful turning in our country, twin indicators of deep problems within our nation, markers of an increased sense of vulnerability and fear.

In the days following 9/11, the very few observers who tried to make connections between the attacks on the one hand and American policies and actions on the other—that is, those who tried to discern real-world consequences of American policy—were all but tarred and feathered. Susan Sontag, for instance, wrote the following in some brief comments in the *New Yorker* magazine:

Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?

For suggesting that there are real-world consequences to our support of ruthless, authoritarian governments in the Middle-East, to our on-going attacks on Iraq, to our military presence in the Gulf States and around the world, and to our unqualified support for Israel against the Palestinians, Sontag was branded a traitor and accused of condoning the destruction. Four years later, of course, many have come to see the importance of her questions.

Whatever else one might say about the tragedy these past weeks in New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf, it has revealed for all to see the desperation of American poverty, the usual invisibility of that poverty, and some of the catastrophic consequences of American policy over the last generation.

Twenty years ago, as I was beginning to work at Community of Hope and Christ House and observing the profound injustice in the inner city, I was also learning from our faith community about the Biblical judgment upon such injustice. The Jeremiah passage we read today is one that has stayed with me. God through the prophet speaks to the current king, Jehoiakim, comparing his rule to that of his father Josiah. His father, says the prophet, defended the cause of the poor and needy, so all went well with him. Jehoiakim, on the other hand, refuses to pay his subjects fair wages while building himself fancier and fancier accommodations, so, according to the prophet, Jehoiakim's fate is sealed.

Walter Brueggemann comments that this passage asks the fundamental questions of what constitutes legitimate governmental authority. The ultimate answer is that defending the cause of the poor and the needy is what makes a king a king, or, in our terms, what makes a government legitimate. Through that passage and many others, I began to conclude that if a legitimate government defended the cause of the poor and needy, then our government was no longer legitimate and that, if the Biblical prophecies were accurate, God's judgment on American society would be some version of exile.

Now, since a punishing, vindictive God has *never* made much sense to me and—since in the mid-1980s it seemed silly to think of the United States collapsing any time soon—I didn't dare speak very loudly about my conclusions that the Biblical judgment upon our society was some form of exile. (I don't like looking like a religious nut.) But I did occasionally wonder what that exile might look like.

Today, of course, it hardly takes much prophetic capacity to envision all sorts of judgment upon our society, ranging from environmental disaster and collapse of the country's infrastructure to economic disruption to bioterrorism to loss of the democratic process and descent toward oligopoly and fascism. It's even possible to see a part of our future in the anarchy of New Orleans during the past several weeks. It's been harder for me, though, to see the *causal* connections between this apparently inevitable judgment, on the one hand, and the deepening poverty and inequality that's been so apparent in our country for the last several decades on the other. Does an angry God punish a country that doesn't care for its poor and needy, or is it the real-world consequences of poverty and inequality that lead to the country's decline?

I've been reading a book by Kevin Phillips entitled *Wealth and Democracy*. With a purely secular, historical analysis, Phillips has begun to connect the dots in ways that I'd only vaguely intuited previously, suggesting that conditions similar to those in the US over the last generation have been present in several other past Empires and have directly caused their demise.

Phillips goes back to three previous Western empires—the Spanish Empire of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Dutch Empire of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the British Empire of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries—and finds that the arcs from emerging economic and political power through a golden age of general prosperity and then to economic and political decline have some astonishing similarities among all four great international powers. All have in common a golden age of general prosperity in which emerging new technologies, the industriousness of the citizenry, and the support of the government combine to make the country an international power. The power comes from the broad general productivity of the country: seafaring, craftsmanship, manufacturing, technological innovation, trade, and so on. Prosperity is much more widely shared during this initial golden age than later on. The degree of inequality within the society—while still very great in most cases—declines to a relative nadir. Virtually every class of people is economically well ahead of those of similar class status in other countries.

Gradually, however, the very wealthy begin to invest in “global finance and services as the political economy of the future, allowing production or seafaring to fade.” The economy turns toward “making money” rather than making products or providing concrete services. Investment in infrastructure atrophies. Wealth, in other words, is invested in speculation and in activities in which only a few can participate, while the more humdrum seafaring, production, manufacturing, or commerce that has brought the country to power declines. Consequently, the opportunities for the mass of people to share in the wealth of the country also decline. Unemployment increases. Wages stagnate. At the beginning of this phase, the *average* wealth of the country continues to rise, but that wealth is increasingly concentrated among a relatively few at the top. Poverty increases substantially, the levels of inequality soar, and fewer and fewer people benefit from the prosperity. Levels of general education decline, and there aren't enough skilled people in the country to do the few highly skilled tasks required, so skilled and educated people from other countries emigrate to take the jobs, in the process exporting their knowledge back to their home countries, which gradually begin to compete with the Empire. Meanwhile, the

government has used its position of power to build up its military, which substantially drains its economic power and undermines investment in infrastructure. Ultimately the evisceration of the productive economy, the overinvestment in the military, and the rise of other states as economic powers leads to the significant decline of the country's position.

It doesn't take much to see where the US is in this picture, but what I find fascinating is that the decline *begins* as the society disinvests in its poor, in its working class, and even in its middle class. In other words, we can read Jeremiah not as a prediction of what an angry God is going to do to a country that doesn't take care of its poor but as a simple recognition that a country that doesn't take care of its poor eviscerates the very strength of its society and is headed for trouble. There are natural consequences to national greed and selfishness.

The attacks four years ago introduced many Americans to our vulnerability to terrorism and have gradually made us cognizant of our deep interdependency with the rest of the world. Those attacks and their aftermath have made us aware that our economic, military, and cultural presence around the world is not universally admired or seen by all as beneficent.

Even as the tragedy in the Gulf continues, Katrina and its aftermath are becoming deeply emblematic of our *domestic* vulnerability, once again, largely self-induced. While you can't blame a country for a natural catastrophe, it's nevertheless true that climatologists have been telling us for some time that a primary effect of global warming (for which our country bears large responsibility) will be the intensification of storms such as hurricanes. No one can know, of course, what would have happened without global warming, but an argument can at least be made that the degree of Katrina's destruction has been influenced by our political choices.

If the hurricane itself can't be squarely blamed on our policies and actions, the disaster afterwards can be. Even without an intensive investigation, it now seems clear that disaster preparedness has been severely compromised by the militarism, by the shrinkage of government, by the tax cuts, and by the general fascination with wealth that have characterized the past several decades. Computer models have for several years, for instance, been describing what would happen when the inevitable large storm hit New Orleans ... and those models included the breaching of the levees and the inundation of much of New Orleans. Based on these projections, the Army Corps of Engineers has for years been asking for funds to strengthen the levees, with dramatic, and ultimately accurate predictions of what would happen if they weren't. The requests have regularly been dismissed or slashed. The disaster in New Orleans, in other words, was no surprise to those who were paying attention to such things. It was, in fact, virtually inevitable.

The past twenty-five years have seen a growing distrust in government programs, an increasing faith that only individuals were responsible for their own fate, and a reliance on the market to solve all problems. Our increasing militarism has taken a larger and larger share of government spending. All of this has inevitably starved the agencies that would have been able to respond to this and other disasters. The government's emphasis on cutting taxes, pursuing military supremacy, and shrinking the scope of government has left the nation's infrastructure deeply compromised.

It seems pretty clear, too, that the war in Iraq significantly weakened the immediate response to Katrina's aftermath. The stalled relief efforts, substandard flood protection systems and the slow pace of getting military personnel to the hardest-hit areas are evidence of a distracted government. Of the Louisiana National Guard troops who should be the first responders in such a disaster, one of every three was in Iraq or other war-related efforts. Given the extreme poverty of New Orleans, the loss of civil order that has been highlighted in the news was quite predictable, and tens of thousands of troops should have been sent immediately to distribute emergency supplies and maintain order.

But what will hopefully be most obvious as we come to understand exactly what happened is the degree to which this tragedy occurred because the poor—especially those of color—had been—once again—made invisible. In a moment of probably unrecognized candor, Michael Brown, the head of FEMA, who was until Friday in charge of disaster relief efforts, is reported to have said after touring the disaster area, "We're seeing people we didn't know exist." And in some ways that was exactly the problem. In preparing for natural disasters, few apparently paid much attention to what would happen to the 100,000 poor people who lived in the parts of New Orleans most likely to be inundated. The evacuation plan didn't include them. Time reported that when it was clear that the hurricane was going to hit and New Orleans officials were meeting to discuss an evacuation order, someone asked about those who had no cars and couldn't afford to get out. The officials just looked uncomfortably at one another. And even after it was clear this past two weeks that something terrible was happening in New Orleans, the governmental relief response was excruciatingly slow. Top-level officials have been quoted as blaming the tragedy on those who didn't evacuate ... even though they had no options. The needs of the poorest were once again ignored. Because the poor remain so invisible in our society, few in the top echelons of government realized the utterly predictable catastrophe that was happening.

Katrina has uncovered once again the desperation of American poverty. There have been many acts of individual heroism and charity, but the tragedy has underlined that individual charity is no substitute for the organized, professional, well-funded capabilities of established

government agencies.

The contrast between what have become government priorities of the past several years and the needs of our people might be conveyed by what's on Congress's schedule as it returns from summer vacation: renewing the push to repeal the estate tax—which affects only the richest 1% of families—and extending tax cuts for investment income. On the other hand, Congress is scheduled to take up proposals for deep budget cuts in Medicaid, food stamps and federal student loans. Congress has also stubbornly resisted raising the minimum wage; its inflation-adjusted level is now as low as it has been in fifty years. In fact, the president even used the emergency in Louisiana and elsewhere to suspend requirements that government contractors pay an area's prevailing wage.

Like 9/11, Katrina has revealed the deep vulnerability created by national policies that have ignored the poor and the needy. The storm asks for a level of inquiry into what we have become. I've begun to wonder if Katrina will also be the marker for the beginning of the severe disruption that's coming.

Little of this is news to anyone here. We're all well aware of the human cost of the war, of the human cost of the tax cuts and the shrinking of government. We know all too well that it's the poor who suffer most from these policies and especially poor people of color. And at a deep level, we recognize that our country is careening headlong into deeper and deeper depths. Our vulnerability stands starkly revealed by these bookends of 9/11 and Katrina.

There are consequences in the world that God has created. We're meant to live as family, loving one another, helping one another. When we stray too far from that, we suffer ... not from the punishments of an angry God but from the nature of the humanity that God has given us. To read again the end of the Jeremiah passage:

He defended the cause of the poor and needy,

then all went well.

Is not that what it means to know me?

Walter Brueggemann writes that this

... line *equates* “knowing God” with doing justice to the needy. The equation needs to be seen in its full claim. It is not asserted that knowledge of God leads to justice, nor conversely is it claimed that social justice leads to knowledge of God. They are the same. One might, on the basis of this text, conclude that the practice of justice is the very reality of Yahweh.

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*my emphasis*  
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And it's here, of course, that we find our appropriate response to the coming disruption. The practice of justice is the very reality of Yahweh. Our little missions, our meager attempts at organizing or political advocacy, our protests, our caring for the earth, our creating community, our helping our neighbor ... all these create those healthy alternative structures that will be needed once the disruption occurs. It may be too late to keep us from collapse, but it's never too late to live according to Gospel values and thus give shape to whatever will come afterwards.

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[1] The Five Gospels, p 219

[2] Brueggemann, Walter, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, p 200-201