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Festival of Saint Simon & Saint Jude

Jeremiah 26:7-16

WHY MUST A PASTOR SAY THINGS THAT HURT

We are familiar with Peter, James, John, Thomas, Andrew, and Philip. Of the Twelve apostles we might be least familiar with Saint Simon and Saint Jude. Even though one of them wrote one of the epistles of the New Testament, Scripture doesn't tell us a lot about their persons. One trait they seem to have had in common from which we can learn is zeal, zeal for the truth and for the mission of the Church. Simon is even listed in the Bible as Simon the Zealot. Before he became a disciple of Jesus he had been part of a sect called Zealots that even resorted to violence to preserve the Jewish faith and life. If Jude's epistle is any indication, he must have been an intense, fiery preacher—someone who fiercely defended the truth and didn't make many friends among those who promoted false doctrine.

Once they became followers of Jesus, no longer would their zeal be exerted for violent, vengeful or hurtful purposes. The Holy Spirit had changed their hearts to employ their zeal for the wholesome, loving and soul-saving purpose of spreading the gospel. But if that's true, why did Jude in his epistle still say seemingly harsh and hurtful things? For that matter, why do your pastors sometimes seem to say things that hurt?

The reading from Jeremiah 26 today gives us opportunity to explore that very question. "Why do you say that?" the worshipers in Jerusalem's temple demanded of Jeremiah. They said, "*You must die! Why do you prophesy in the Lord's name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?*" *And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.* Why would Jeremiah say hurtful things that upset the people so, people who still at least have enough regard to come to church? Weren't there plenty of backsliders and unbelievers out in the streets to rail on?

Why must a pastor today say things that hurt, that make people feel uncomfortable, even angry? Why might he have to speak critically about what other churches are teaching? Doesn't he know that makes people feel bad?

Why can't his sermons just be inspirational messages that make you feel good?"

Jeremiah answers. When the local officials heard about the riot at the temple they quickly convened a hearing to judge the dispute. We are told, *When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the Lord and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the Lord's house. Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied (or preached) against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!" Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: "The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard."*

The Lord sent Jeremiah. The Lord gave him specific things to say. So it is with your pastors. They speak because Christ called them through this congregation. Christ has also given them what to say.

But there are so many different messages coming from pulpits today. Who's to say who's right? How can we know that what our pastor says is from God? The religious scene was just as confusing in Jeremiah's day

too. How could they know Jeremiah was sent from God?

God had His Word written down for them. They could have compared what Jeremiah said with God's written Word, for God will never contradict Himself. Granted, it was some 600 years before Christ. They didn't have the entire Bible yet, but they had enough. They had most of the Old Testament by then. They could have found that Jeremiah was saying nothing new. Jerusalem was on the verge of being sacked by Babylonian armies. Jeremiah's predecessors had consistently warned something like this would happen if the people ever became apathetic about the true God.

Ironically, it was the lay-people, the princes judging the case, who knew their Scriptures, and because of that found Jeremiah to be innocent and rescued him from the angry church leaders who should have known better.

Like Jeremiah God wants your pastors to tell you what the Bible says. No more, but also no less –even when it means saying something that hurts, pointing out sin, wrong beliefs, false doctrines put forth by churches or the mistaken notions of science, politics or society. The

only reason there are so many different messages out there is not because the Bible isn't clear. It is because sin so saturates human thinking that without the Spirit's help the world cannot accept what the Bible clearly says.

Just like Jeremiah, a pastor's words may hurt at times, but then again, it really isn't the pastor's message, is it? If it's coming from the Bible, it's God's message. In that case why would God want to say things that hurt? Because God is compassionate.

No, that's not double-talk. God is compassionate. He did not desire the destruction of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day. When God says something upsetting, it's not mere vindictiveness. It's love. Our human nature is so deadened by sin that we have to be made aware of our need to be rescued from judgment. A person cannot believe in Jesus as His Savior unless he first believes in his sin. Try giving a candy bar to a person who has just finished Thanksgiving dinner. In the same way we'll have no desire for the good things God wants to give us in connection with Jesus unless we're made hungry for it first.

Jeremiah preached to the people in Jerusalem, *Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against*

you. God seeks our repentance. By telling us things that hurt God the Holy Spirit does just that –He works repentance in us. He works that change of heart and change of mind in us. Sin, false doctrine and wrong thinking are no longer OK. The Holy Spirit makes us recognize why we need Jesus to be our Savior, why we need His forgiveness. That’s why His servant, a pastor, must say things at times that hurt.

But the grand irony of it all is that’s not the Spirit’s *primary* work. That’s not the main thing He’s interested in. That’s only the minor part of what He does, just the starting point. Father, Son and Holy Spirit –God’s primary work is to save, to rescue, to have compassion, to forgive. God the Son personally came to earth, suffering and dying on the cross to make our forgiven status a sure thing. He keeps coming now, again and again, from heaven to announce His forgiveness to us with His Words, to cover us with His forgiveness in Baptism, to fill us up with His forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper. You might sternly tell your child not to cross the busy street. Your real objective is you want her to

enjoy a long and happy life. A basketball coach might scold a player for failing to set a pick. What he really wants is for that player to taste victory. God's real objective in saying things that hurt is that He wants us to taste forgiveness, relief, peace with God, rescue from death and the devil, new life, joy, the resurrection, fellowship with God, the glory of heaven, the status of becoming co-rulers with Him in His kingdom –and all these things the Holy Spirit freely gives to us not by something we do, but through faith in Jesus. Through the message about Jesus the Holy Spirit creates faith in Jesus in us. When He creates faith in Jesus in us He also gives us all the things, the infinite number of priceless, eternal things that Jesus won for us by means of a cross and an empty tomb. He gives us salvation.

The apostle Jude pulled no punches. The prophet Jeremiah pulled no punches. Your pastors may also need to say things cause discomfort. But that pain is ever so brief compared to the infinitely greater forgiveness and everlasting salvation that God floods us with through the message of His Son Jesus. Therefore, even when a pastor must say things that hurt, we may say, “Amen, you would not give me this message if you did not love me,” and we may give thanks to God for it.