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“Loving the Church We Have”

Jeremiah 7:1-15

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The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? I, too, am watching, says the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors just what I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Jeremiah 7:1-15

Anniversary Sundays are a good time to look back and remember good times, even good times that happened before we were here. Like the time in 1868 when Charles Dickens came to Plymouth to read A Christmas Carol. The tickets were general admission, so some decided to camp out on Orange Street to get the best seats—which they thought were at the front by the way. The weather turned cold. They lit a bonfire. They started drinking. They kept drinking. They had a riot. The police arrested lots of people. Not many churches have riots before book signings.

Anniversary Sundays remind us that the world has changed during Plymouth's 177 years. The church used to decide right and wrong. From 1933-1964, the Catholic Legion of Decency—terrible name for a comic book—published a list of movies Catholics could not attend—and it worked. Studios did not want their movies to be banned. That is hard to imagine now. Being banned by the church would increase ticket sales. The world has changed.

Churches used to be the center of charity work. Church members did all their giving with one check, ten percent. Now church people support a dozen charities. Churches do not get the same financial loyalty, so not nearly enough of our budget comes from giving. Our church pays the bills in a variety of ways that Beecher would not recognize.

Churches used to be the center of family life. Fewer weddings and funerals take place in churches. People used to belong to church bowling leagues and church softball leagues. One of the reasons the church is no longer the center of family life is that fewer people get married at 21.

Single adults outnumber married adults in New York.

Churches used to get more institutional loyalty. People no longer go to church because it is expected. Like most churches, our congregation is smaller in the summer. People feel less obligation. We cannot guilt people into coming to church. And if churches spend their time talking about self-preservation, more people will stay away.

Churches have had a precipitous decline in a remarkably short period of time. According to one study, 40 million Americans have left their churches in the last 25 years. Some leave for dull reasons—convenience, busyness, and inertia. But others leave the church because the church hurt them. Churches make major mistakes on racism, sexism, homophobia, scandals, and bad politics.

Sometimes people do not feel accepted. Young adults, in particular, can feel alienated over a church's stance on gender, abortion, or orientation. They get angry at the church. Of course, there is a long history of that.

The prophet Jeremiah is angry. He is fire and brimstone angry. He is not at the pulpit at the front of the sanctuary. He's got a bullhorn and is standing on the street, yelling at people going into worship: "You think you're good people because you show up for worship every now and then. Guess again. You come to the temple after lying, cheating, and chasing the almighty dollar and think everything is okay because you're here. You want to believe, "This is God's temple, so we're fine." That's total nonsense! Do you think you can ignore the poor, and then march into the Temple and say, "We're good"? You're kidding yourselves. Remember Shiloh. Shiloh was a sanctuary with priests, and the people at Shiloh thought a

lot of themselves. Shiloh isn't there anymore.”

Is it any wonder the king arrested Jeremiah and lowered him into a well to shut him up? Jeremiah loves God's people, but it is a critical, questioning, and often angry love, because Jeremiah also loves the ones they are ignoring. He loves the ones who are left out. True prophets have a tear in their eye.

Abraham Heschel explains: “Humankind's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor. To God, however, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval. God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, and widows and orphans are oppressed?”

Jeremiah is angry because he knows we can do better. He preaches: “If you act honestly and without partiality, if you stop ignoring the immigrants, homeless, children, and widows, no longer destroying your own souls with selfishness, then I will meet you in the sanctuary. Then we can worship.”

The secret to understanding God's anger is God's care. God's justice is God's love. When people tell ministers how disillusioned and disappointed they are with the church, they expect the ministers to argue, but we do not usually defend the church. We usually ask them to forgive the church. The church has always been darkness as well as light, a confounding mixture of faith and arrogance. Sometimes the church has been Christ's face one moment and Christ's betrayer the next. But God makes good on the promise that God will be with us. The true church is always

here, even when it is hard to see.

We have to forgive an institution that has wandered from the way of Jesus. We have to forgive a church that has hurt us. Such forgiveness does not mean minimizing the harm done, but means forgiving the church the way we forgive others and ourselves. The problem with always being angry with the church for not being everything God hopes for is that we grow critical and stop loving. We need to forgive the church for our sake as well as the sake of the church.

Most of us have thought about giving up on the church. The more we are around the church the more the church hurts us. But the church is where we remember God's love, feel God's love, and share God's love. In our pursuit of the perfect church, we can miss the one we have. If we want the church to be more like Christ, we start with gratitude for Christ's church.

With fewer people going to church, more researchers are pointing out that going to church has—and this has not been our experience 100% of the time—mental health benefits. Church provides a sense of belonging, counters loneliness, and fosters compassion.

Gallup, Harvard, and Baylor surveyed 200,000 people in 65 countries and found that those who attend church each week are happier than those who do not. The countries with the lowest mental health scores have the lowest levels of religious practice—attending services, reading scripture, and praying. Loving others is good for us. Giving makes us feel better.

A National Institute of Health study found that people making donations or engaging in service activate the same parts of the brain that responds to food and romance.

Doing good makes us feel good. We are a gathering of people who want to do good. We expect something good to happen when we come here. We long for people to know our names, make coffee hour interesting, and push us to help the needy.

We come to this church, bringing our pain, including the pain we have experienced from the church, because at Plymouth, people meet the best friends they will ever have, people who feel completely alone hear a kind word at just the right time, and people devastated by the death of someone they love let this community slowly show them life again. We are a family of children who make us more alive by their presence, young adults who are here because they want to live as Christians, and senior citizens who have given their lives to make this a family.

In sharing our lives with the church we realize that God is sharing our lives with us. It is a circle. We give ourselves to God, which leads to giving ourselves to one another, and which leads to recognizing that God is with us. God is the life of this church.

God is here in worship, as we wrestle with God, as God embraces us. God is here when we help one another and when we help people we do not even know. God is here when we realize that this church is more than just us. Measured against what we would be without God, it is clear that God is at work.

Tom Bodett said, "A person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for."

At this table, we thank God for giving us one another to love, real ministry to do, and the hope of being your church.