

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

ANATHOTH AND NAZARETH

Jeremiah 11:18-20

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Analysis by Joseph Justus van der SABB

*18It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew;
then you showed me their evil deeds.19But I was like a gentle
lamb led to the slaughter.*

*And I did not know it was against me
that they devised schemes, saying,
“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
so that his name will no longer be remembered!”*

*20But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously,
who try the heart and the mind,
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.*

*“Let me see your retribution upon them...” – Jeremiah of
Anathoth, prophet of the LORD.*

*“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do...” – Jesus
of Nazareth, the actual LORD.*

*Author’s Note: The tension and/or unity between Justice and
Forgiveness has led to the thinking of many thoughts and the
writing of many books. What follows are ideas, possibilities,
notes, observations, perhaps somewhat unorthodox. May your own*

wrestling, in turn, yield a harvest of good fruit.

DIAGNOSIS: Justice and Forgiveness—Paradox

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Anathoth and Nazareth*

How can there be justice in a world where the guilty, the evil, are simply forgiven? We think of the slain: Abel, Monseñor Óscar Romero, Rev Martin Luther King Jr, Jesus Christ, Michael Brown, the Charleston Nine, and to name even so few is to glimpse in horror all the countless silent millions who have been so slaughtered, unnamed, unremembered, unavenged... who, like Jeremiah, looked, and saw devious, scheming evil... and then watched as it smirked and gunned them down. And so here is Jeremiah, the voice of the LORD, crying out... and is Jeremiah weak for wanting retribution and justice? Should he have just “been a man about it” and, like Jesus, asked God to forgive those who sought his harm? Isn’t it okay to cry out for vengeance and to seek justice? Mustn’t we? Yet Jesus did not... Jesus begged that those who killed him be forgiven. Forgiven. Which was very beautiful... and foolish and sublime and totally outrageous.

O LORD, to whom shall we go? Which of your Words is the key to life and, more, to life abundant? Is there a “right” or “better” answer here or do we each just have to wander on with what grace is afforded us?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Intentional Indecision*

Justice. Forgiveness. The two eternal monuments that hold up our sky. So far away that we can’t even see them. Beyond this far horizon, the just yearning to see evil thwarted, thoroughly punished and, more, to see righteousness established in peace.

That drumbeat march echoing in every heart to end injustice and fight for equality for all. What a well-ordered place the Realm of Justice must be! Sigh! Beyond the other horizon, far more distant, the zen-like place of divine tranquility that accepts, at last, that there is no possible peace but through impossible forgiveness. What joy those who live by Forgiveness must finally feel! Sigh! But we are neither here nor there. We are those who live in this space between. And in this spacious middle land we do not actually busy ourselves much with lofty justice, neither are we overly occupied with far off forgiveness. For we can't go too far toward justice before it's clear we too will be judged and destroyed. And we don't want to go very near forgiveness because we'd probably have to betray justice and forgive the unrepentant guilty, which would be encouraging evil, for which we'd deserve to be destroyed too.

And in the end, maybe we don't even know what forgiveness is. Or what justice should look like. And so we just mix and match and muster our bits to try to build a middle tower to prop up that immense and looming sky. The "justice" we mix with our bricks isn't very just, though. And the "forgiveness" smells a bit dated. And so we're minding our busy-ness, but when we hear echoes of Jeremiah's ancient cry for vengeance on evil, his raw plea for God's justice, we know our modern superficial efforts are nowhere near good enough. And when Jesus speaks, my God, how can we still be so far from that Man who invites us to simply love and forgive each other in order to then receive and abide in divine forgiving love?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Cut off from the Land of the Living*

Isn't this the slowest death? To neither enjoy the fruits of justice nor to be able to truly forgive or be forgiven? The Land of the Living, wherever it is, must be the place where there is no hole torn in the firmament, where the pillars of the heavens

abide, vast and firm forever. Will we travel to the East or to the West to find this place? Commit our cause to the right or to the left? Will it be found where the four rivers have their source? It's a pointless search. We are barred from the Land of the Living by the LORD's own flaming sword. We are plunged into this wilderness, without water or bread, crawling toward what rest we can find, wandering from gully to sun burnt peak, from thorn bushes to the places of shriveled vines.

And while we then wander, the evil settles among us, infecting even our very souls. The heavens loom low. The storms which seem to punish our mediocrity and compromise and timidity and faithless apathy come more and more frequently. Here, at the end of all things, we don't even get very good sunsets.

PROGNOSIS: Justice and Forgiveness: Mystery

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The New Arrangement*

And into this bleak and dying world, God sent his one and only Son. In whom dwelt all Justice. Who actually embodied Forgiveness. And they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!" And with one hand outstretched to each distant horizon, he cried out, It is complete. And we've been talking about what happened next ever since.

Forgiveness v2.0: what does this mean?

- **New definition: Choosing to act and be for the good of the other, in relationship, despite what evil they have done.**
- Forgiveness is not overlooking and forgetting. It's not ignoring what's been done. Not allowing evil to persist. Not setting aside consequences or even just desserts.
- Forgiveness is acts of love toward a person even though

they have done evil and may do evil again.

- Granted, we've had other words we've used to unpack what Forgiveness can mean: Overlooking; pardoning; erasing; removing; covering; washing clean; ignoring; forgetting; taking away; forgoing some consequences (hell) but not all consequences (prison).
- But a problem with forgiveness understood superficially like this is that the victims of the crimes get no justice. If a war criminal is pardoned, where is the good news for the victims' families? Pardon may seem like good news for a contrite perpetrator, but, it seems, it must be further violence upon the victims.
- Further, these traditional (biblical) images all focus on the "sins"... as if sins, infractions against laws or expectations, are the problem, and if cleaned up, should render us qualified for admission at the Pearly Gates.
- In fact, the actual root of sins is Sin itself... which does not go away. Which cannot be ignored or overlooked or "washed away" or "taken away"...
- Sin must be seen for what it is, and God's new choice to Forgive is God saying: "I do not abandon you, though I see, and grieve, the horror you have always been. Yet, because of my Beloved Son, I choose to be for you, not against you."

And Justice v2.0?

- God's Justice does not mean punishment, vengeance, revenge, retaliation, vindication. God is not out to get even with sinners, not even the really bad guys. God's Justice is not the slaughtering of sinners with a tornado or a flood.
- **God's Justice does mean that God acts for the good of sinners.** To bring them to knowledge of right and wrong. Perhaps to thwart their evil plots and so spare others,

preserving creation. To bring sinners to a place where they cannot but trust God in Christ instead of their own achievements.

So in this picture, both Forgiveness and Justice are aspects of the same God? Both are God acting for the good of sinners? Well, is it wrong to say so? Not giving us what we clearly do deserve (damnation of every kind). Giving us what we clearly don't deserve (the abundant benefits of Christ!) God, and God's people, CAN and MUST and DO choose to love sinners and act for their good. Call it Justice, call it Forgiveness, call it what you will.

The key is love as motivation. Jeremiah's desire for vengeance and retribution, however divine he thinks it is, comes from a place of very human unlove. Wanting others to "get what they deserve" comes from a place of wounded pride and fear and untrust, not of true love.

Jesus' prayed: Father, continue to act in love toward these who now torture and murder me, restoring them to yourself, transforming them, not punishing them vindictively, not destroying them, for they know not what they do. Jesus prayed, and died, and rose again and so sheathed the flaming sword and established the Land of the Living, anew, here and now, among us. Forgiveness is now written on a scale so grand that it seals over the broken sky, so intimate that it is on our very hearts. Justice is now reestablished so boldly that there is no way we can ever build our own monuments again. What projects we engage ourselves in are the working out of God's own Good News: "I will not destroy you. I am for you. I will help you."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Commitment*

For to you I have committed my cause. So is this Good News that sinners can actually trust? Does this analysis give us any new ways to see ourselves? God? The world around us?

There is a boldness now in this spacious land, and a light. Not a boldness to sin willfully and repeatedly, but a boldness to trust the God who has made a way. There is a way to seek justice and to love mercy. There is a way to face persecution without losing faith and without succumbing to false pride. There is a way to love others, without condoning, or ignoring, the pain they inflict on others. Our cause is in God's hands and it is God's cause, God's commitment to the world, to act for good, for Jesus' sake.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Loving Retribution*

How then do we live and move and have our being in a world where we too, like Jeremiah, can see the evil around us? Isn't it still right that we ask God to intervene, to knock some sense into those pernicious politicians? And when the bodies wash ashore or the drone strike goes awry, or when it doesn't, shouldn't God be approached in humble prayer to dish out some retribution and sweet revenge?

Yet that is not our heart anymore. Because it is not God's heart. The evil grieves us. We grieve for the victims and commit to their care and comfort. But we also grieve the perpetrators and watch as God uses the most unlikely of us to reach into their lives with the mercy of God. The response, the retribution, that we are called to bring upon the world is one guided by love.