

TENSION OF TRUTH

[Written in Oral form]

Church pastors wear many hats / have many roles, such as pastoral care, administration, educating and preaching,....and preaching includes nurturing and the aspect of a prophet.

It would be nice to pick and chose the ones to wear, yet following Christ doesn't work that way,.....nor does life.

To be sure, farmers probably wear more hats, and each of us have different functions and responsibilities we have to fulfill,....including the church.

It's not easy being a church--the body of Christ. Much of what we do is exploring and striving for truth -
- to live in truth and to be truthful.

Yet, that pursuit can be difficult, especially if we, as Jesus did, engage in our culture....with our devotion for truth.

Truth can be like a moving target,.... and maybe God wants it that way,..... and also maybe we too often aim at the wrong target.

A common error is to get hung up on the facts, and that the concrete measurable evidence is the truth, but it's Not.

For example, a fact could be 5 degrees in the middle of January.

Our truth is 5 degrees in January is pretty warm, but in Miami, Florida, when it sinks to 5 degrees, people bundle up and bring in their dogs.

So, who's right? Is 5 degrees warm or cold?

And,....there lies the rub: truth is not a fact,....and that causes tension.

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People have fought and argued over lesser issues,.....and besides determining what temperature, when and where is really cold is the wrong target.

Closer to the truth is affirming that certain temperatures can make us feel cold or warm. We humans have that response in common.

Arguing that the truth is in the facts or is limited to a certain situation causes great tension and is like debating whether a glass is half full or half empty.

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Yes, I realize the 1/2 glass illustration is meant to reveal optimism or pessimism,.....and I regret that I'm too analytical, but.....there is more to it than that.

Such as, what's in the glass? Is it poison or water, and the degree of thirst is an issue,.....as is the size of the glass.

If I'm really thirsty, and it's a little, teeny, tiny shot glass 1/2 full of water,.....well that's not going to cut it.

Okay,.....I'm going off on a tangent ,.....but the point is searching, exploring and exposing aspects of the truth.....can be difficult.... and cause a lot of grief and tension.

Subsequently, church's and pastors are often tempted to give people what they want to hear...and to avoid controversial issues.

I understand that temptation. I appreciate wanting to feel good, and I don't like to have more tension in my life. I have enough already.

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Yet, as Willard Metzger recently stated, and I quote:

"I feel conflicted. I struggle with the impulse to be quiet and mind my own business. Yet I wrestle with the sense that God is asking communities of faith to be an alternative voice."

He went on and talked about the church's roll in addressing environmental issues and global human rights concerns.

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When we speak out, we are putting truth to the test, and that is scary, yet.....isn't that our passion--pursuing, discovering and living the truth?

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Still, nobody wants to be an agent of stress and tension.

I bet that the prophet Jeremiah wanted to be a well liked comforter and encourager, yet.....circumstances did not allow him to be that with integrity. So, we regard Jeremiah as a prophet who ranted and warned people. Pity.

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A little bit of background is necessary in order to better understand today's text from Jeremiah.

The passage presents a strange exchange between two rival prophets, and it may seem odd to modern ears. It crystallizes the difference between true and false prophets in a time of great crisis and upheaval. So, the background story is important.

In 597 BCE, Jerusalem had fallen to the Babylonians.

King Jehoiakin had been deposed and replaced by his uncle Zedekiah. The real King Jehoiakin and many leading citizens had been carried away into captivity along with the sacred vessels and treasures of the temple. It was a perilous time for all Jews.

As one of the two great prophets of the Babylonian Exile (the other being Ezekiel), Jeremiah had a very realistic view of the events his nation experienced.

It is worth reading the preceding chapter 27 to gain the correct perspective on this exchange with the ever optimistic Hannaniah.

Jeremiah had proposed, in Yahweh's name, that Judah (the only part of the nation remaining) submit to their Babylonian overlords rather than resist. Jeremiah was convinced that nothing was gained by using violence to rebel against the Babylonians.

He dramatized his prophesy by donning a heavy yoke.

The religious and civil authorities were incensed by such objectionable and pessimistic behaviour. They did NOT want to hear the severity of Jeremiah's warning about the inevitability of failure should they do otherwise.

Moreover, they didn't want to hear that repentance and change was necessary, too. Their arrogance had preceded their downfall.

They didn't want to stand up for justice and righteousness.

The people wanted a quick fix,... and they wanted some revenge.

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So, before the people, stood two contemporary prophets--Jeremiah and the rising star, Hannaniah.

They each represented two very different approaches and messages.

As one who sought to please, the prophet Hannaniah had tried to reassure the priests and the people that within two years King Jehoiakin and the temple vessels would be brought back from Babylon. Hannaniah was encouraging the people to revolt, and that with God's help, the Babylonians would crumble and submit.

For defeated people, that was the message they wanted to hear!

Yes indeed, the glass WAS 1/2 full, but was that the real reality?

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Jeremiah sought to clarify the simple truth that there could be no peace for Israel despite the hopeful proclamation of Hannaniah.

Jeremiah hoped Hannaniah's prediction would come true, but he knew that the actual situation was far from favourable for that to happen. He also believed that Yahweh still had a purpose in the disastrous Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah proclaimed that working within and with the Babylonians, the Jews could help transform them, and that justice and righteousness could flow far and wide.

But, that was NOT an easy task,.....and striving to change and bring change meant a lot of pressure and tension.

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The text presents two prophets and two messages--two choices.

Now, Change the channel to our own time and place, and what do we see? What is our situation? What sort of captivity are we living in?

Is God not troubled by the vicious wars and counter insurgencies rampant through the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan?

Does God realize how Western arrogance and aggression caused much of this, and if so,...maybe repentance is in order, and who is calling the us to repent?

Is God not angry because of the suffering of millions of refugees, the most since WW11?

And, What is the price in human suffering and despair of our unloading and unplayable debts on so many African nations?

Are we ignoring the truths of all this pain and anguish?

And,.....what about our silence on the path of climate change?

Does it cause us too much tension to both speak out against destructive systems and use those systems?

We have to use fossil fuels for transportation, that is a fact, today.

And, it is a fact that the extraction and use of fossil fuels are destructive to the environment.

Still,.....the truth maybe in the journey to a better way, and that better system hasn't arrived yet, but is worth reaching for.

But, there is tension in that process. What should we do?

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In addition, can patriotism include protest?

Tuesday is Canada Day. Is it too stressful to both celebrate the achievements of our nation as we also protest our bad choices?

Or, must patriotism be blind loyalty?

What is our roll in advocating for justice?

How do churches need to respond?

And,...if Jeremiah were living today, what would he tell us?

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To the prophet Hannaniah, Jeremiah responded in two ways, in addition to presenting his own message.

First, Jeremiah affirmed Hannaniah's vision that all would be well in two years.

Jeremiah said, "Amen" to it.

"Amen" means agreement / affirmation.

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AND note, he didn't condemn Hannaniah. Jeremiah found something positive to say. He pointed out that Hannaniah's glass was 1/2 full.

Jeremiah affirmed Hannaniah's dream / his desire / his hope. To be sure, Hannaniah wanted a grand and beautiful outcome.

It was Hannaniah's methods /means to that end that troubled Jeremiah.

So then, Jeremiah cited the history of similar prophets who proclaimed that violence would bring peace, and how the peace never arrived after the path. Violence didn't bring peace. The means were flawed.

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I'm deeply impressed and moved by Jeremiah's approach.

He didn't ridicule Hannaniah. Instead, he applauded Hannaniah's good intentions.

Jeremiah lifted up the positive. He demonstrated the way of peace.

This is a lesson I must remember.

It is a good lesson.

Moreover, instead of countering Hannaniah with a personal attack, Jeremiah deferred to history--the truth in past journeys.

Jeremiah held up a higher / truer measuring stick.

Jeremiah's approach is a strong, yet gentler way of pointing out the 1/2 empty class.

Jeremiah was more than a prophet. In this passage he wore a number of hats, that of a nurturer, teacher and a pastor.

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In contrast, Hannaniah responded poorly.

Verse 10, which isn't part of our text, tells of how Hannaniah took and broke the symbolic yoke that Jeremiah was wearing.

Hannaniah sought to discredit Jeremiah with a personal attack.

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How must we respond to the culture we live in?

Can we find ways to affirm those who attest to what troubles us, as we seek to bring illumination without destruction?

Can we proclaim and seek a truth that is beyond us?

And,.....maybe the truth is also in the journey?

Maybe, the glass is being filled as it is being poured out?

I like that imagine.

It seems to project Christ: being filled with the Spirit and pouring out the Spirit.

I think there is truth in that.