

Weekly Reading – Monday, September 14, 2009

We turn now to the lessons from the Common Ecumenical Lectionary for Sunday, September 20, 2009. This is also, if you're counting, Proper 20. I'll use the typological Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah rather than the semi-continuous one from Proverbs.

Jeremiah 11: 18 - 20

Here prophet Jeremiah, in an introspective mood, ponders the cost of his calling and of being faithful to it. Verse 19, "I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter," is somehow touching. How often good and well-intentioned leader's underestimate the level and even meanness of resistance (a drama being played out on the national screen at the moment). I remember being stunned by this and confessing it to a friend. His response was helpful. "If you're not making some enemies," he said, "you're probably not doing your job." Still, that's tough to swallow as I, like most human beings and most ministers, wanted to be liked. "Good leaders," I heard someone say the other day, "are willing to be misunderstood." There is a loneliness to the leadership role and vocation, and Jeremiah gives poignant expression to it here and elsewhere. He "commits" his cause to the Lord, which one must do, without being arrogant or self-righteous about that.

James 3: 13 - 4: 3; 7 - 8a

This citation of chapter and verse sounds as complicated as a football play! Wisdom, or skill in living, is James's topic and concern in a community pressured from outside and given to disunity within. True wisdom is marked by congruence and integration between what a person says and what they do, between their inward being and their outward actions. False wisdom talks the talk, but doesn't walk the walk. Moreover, false wisdom uses the language of faith to cover up and camouflage selfishness, vanity and manipulation of others. James closes the gap between individual life and the large social world, seeing the origin of wars in the "cravings" at work within us. Verses 7 and 8, while stern (James is nothing if not stern) are promising and in their way hopeful. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." Sometimes, we preachers need to be that blunt and direct.

Mark 9: 30 - 37

Jesus' second prediction of his crucifixion and resurrection is met by the disciples arguing among themselves as to which of them is the greatest, which links nicely to both the previous lessons, the prediction of suffering to Jeremiah, the jousting of egos to James. Sometimes one hears preachers or people reading this story express surprise and condemnation of the disciples for their missing-the-point argument about who's number one? I am surprised by our surprise and easy judgment. Get a group of clergy together and the discussion, or at least its subtext, is often as not, "Who's the greatest?" "How big is your church?" "Is it growing?" Lest we be too hard on clergy, the relentless feeding of the ego is often the subject of many discussions as people talking to each other, talk one way or another about themselves. Lord have mercy! Truly. Jesus points to a powerless person, a child, and says pay attention to him/

her. I think that means, "If you would follow me, don't be a social climber. Go the other direction. Descend." The Shaker hymn, "'Tis a Gift to be Simple," comes to mind. It's worth noting that Jesus is not against greatness. He's for it. He simply has a very different notion of what constitutes greatness.