

Holy Trouble

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Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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When we read our two texts that Cathy read for us this morning, what we see is that when you are participating in God's mission in the world, it's at least occasionally going to get you into trouble. For those of us who have spent much of our lives thinking the highest priority in life was to stay out of trouble and to have everyone like us, part of the spiritual growth of following Jesus is realizing that following Jesus can get us into trouble in our world. No matter how much we have had leaders like John Lewis talk about the value of getting into 'good trouble,' it can still seem counter-intuitive for some of us. Following Jesus and participating in God's mission in the world will get you into trouble, from time to time.

The Presbyterian Church USA's Book of Order begins with an opening section about God's mission in our world. "The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people." Let me read that again: "The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people." Now I used to think our Book of Order was a boring collection of rules, only to open it up and find that it is surging with missional energy. The Book of Order begins with God's mission in the world, because it turns out that "mission" is not just one slice of a congregation's life, alongside other things that the church does, like worship and education and fellowship and service. *All of those* are part of the church's overall mission. And the church's mission only has value as it participates in God's mission. Because it turns out that God is up to certain particular things in our world.

And when we participate in those things, it will sometimes get us into trouble.

There are 5 verbs to God's mission: the triune God creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. *Creates* all people. *All* people are created by God, which is why we are not permitted to treat anyone as garbage, not permitted to treat anyone as a monster, not permitted to treat anyone as expendable. *Redeems* all things and all people. All things are redeemable, healable, forgivable, usable. God's redemptive capacity is why we are required to have hope for all people. *Sustains* all things – when we are exhausted and broken down, that is an alert that we need to lean into God's sustaining Spirit. Creating, redeeming, sustaining – Dignity, Hope, Energy. These first three verbs are the trinitarian verbs of God's mission. The last two verbs put a finer point on all of this and begin to draw out the trouble in God's mission. God *rules* all things and all people. The world starts to be a little defensive here. God *transforms* all things and people. Here the powers-that-be may think, "All right, God. Now you've gone too far." God's transformation and God's rule subvert all of our attempts at control, all of our attempts to make things come out the way we want them to, ways that support our particular vested interests.

When we are participating in God's mission in the world, when we are following Jesus in the world, it will sometimes get us into trouble. But it will be a *holy trouble*, and we will experience a kind of peacefulness and joyfulness and solidness, when we are standing on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

In our gospel reading that Cathy read for us today, we get a taste of how Jesus got into trouble with people. At the beginning of the text, they are raving about him. He reads a passage from Isaiah 61 about God's liberating work, announces that this scripture is being fulfilled as they hear it, and the congregation says, "Oh my goodness! He's such a good speaker!" But by the end of the text, the congregation is ready to murder him. What happened? Their flip on him here is a foreshadowing of the way the crowds will welcome Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and call for his crucifixion on Good Friday.

What happened was that Jesus made it clear to them that God's liberating grace was not intended for them alone, but also for their enemies. That's the sort of thing that will get you in trouble. Jesus reaches deep into the tradition to summon two of the great prophets of Israel – Elijah and Elisha, from 1 and 2 Kings – and he observes that they were sent to bring God's liberating mercies, not to their own people, their own tribe, but to Gentiles who were enemies of Israel. Love of enemies is how God works. When the Book of Order tells us that God is creating, redeeming, sustaining, ruling, and transforming *all* things and *all* people, all means *all*. The spiritually demanding work for each of us individually and for us together is to acknowledge whom we want to exclude from the mercies of God. Sometimes, we may be ashamed to realize that we think certain groups or certain people are undeserving of God's love. And other times, we may proudly think that we are completely justified in excluding certain groups or individuals from God's grace. In our world, excluding people can be a pretty reliable way to score points with the in-group. So when we extend the circle of God's love wider, it will often get us into trouble, just as it did with Jesus.

When the prophet Jeremiah received his calling in chapter 1, he is sent – like Jesus – not just to his own tribe, not just to the people of Israel, but to "the nations." God's mission and God's purposes are not only spiritual concerns. God's purposes have to do with poverty and injustice in the world, they have to do with the way that dominating, elite powers extract wealth from weaker and more vulnerable groups. And wherever that is happening in the world, the five verbs from the Book of Order begin to rumble: create, redeem, sustain, rule, transform; create, redeem, sustain, rule, transform.

God summons Jeremiah to build the beloved community in the midst of the pain and violence of the nations. But before Jeremiah can engage in this work of construction, he is first sent to do the work of deconstruction. In verse 10, God tells Jeremiah, Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms to do six things. The Book of Order used five verbs for God's mission, but God uses six verbs for Jeremiah's mission: to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. Six verbs, four of which are verbs of negativity – pluck up, pull down, destroy, and overthrow, and two of which are about the work of development – to build and to plant.

Now, it does not take much imagination to understand that, if you happen to be presiding over one of the kingdoms or nations or empires in the world, against which the prophet Jeremiah brings his ministry of plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, you are not likely to be pleased with him. Following God's mission got Jeremiah into a lot of trouble with those people, with kings and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. The work of social healing is difficult because it involves a diagnosis that society is sick. Most of us do not like being told that we are sick. Doing an intervention with someone who is in the throes of an addiction can call forth the wrath of the one who is addicted. When we are addicted to something, we often do not take kindly to people who want us to get better. And when it is an entire society that is addicted to something, that society will not take kindly to people who want things to get better.

Following Jesus and participating in God's mission in the world will sometimes get us into trouble. But it will be a holy trouble, and we will experience a kind of peacefulness and joyfulness and solidness, when we are standing on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. This is why it is absolutely essential to be a church of prayerful action. Our action must be deeply rooted and grounded in prayer, so that our actions come from the place of love. Our world of anxiety and impatience will tell you that prayer is a waste of

time, there's too much to do! If we begin to act apart from prayer, we may create a lot of trouble, but it will have more to do with our own egos, and it may not have anything to do with following Jesus. Jesus and Jeremiah did not set out to cause trouble for trouble's sake. There's nothing particularly holy about that. Jeremiah and Jesus were drawn into the purposes of God, to heal the nations and to build the beloved community, where God creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms *all* things and *all* people. God is drawing us into those purposes, that mission, as well. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.