

## “Faithful Discomfort”

**Text: Jeremiah 1: 4-10, 17-19; Luke 4:21-30**

**Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 1/31/2010**

**Prayer:** May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever felt like Jeremiah? Have you ever felt like God had a task for you that you didn't want to get involved with? Have you ever felt like you weren't prepared enough, not strong enough, or somehow inadequate for what God wanted you to do? After all, the task God gives to Jeremiah isn't an easy one. This isn't "Go tell everyone I love them." Jeremiah is to "pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." How would you like that job description? God tells Jeremiah it's going to be tough: "they will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you." Have you ever felt like Jeremiah?

Have you ever felt like Jesus? Have you ever felt like what ever you say is wrong? Have you ever felt like people are too caught up in their own issues and their own lives to really listen? Have you ever felt threatened or in harms way because of your faith? Contemporary wisdom says to avoid conversation about politics and religion, but how do we do that when our faith tradition tells us that we have good news to share. Have you ever felt like Jesus?

Are you ever a reluctant, resistant prophet? Do you say to God I'm willing to do faith up to this point, but don't push me beyond it because I won't go? Do you want a faith that is easy and comforting and shy away when God seems to ask of you more then you feel you have to give?

Well if you felt any of these things then I know exactly how you feel. I've felt them all. Probably felt most of them in any given year. Whether you're a trained religious professional or one new to the faith, God stretches us all.

I was thinking some of a time when I felt reluctant and resistant. There were many examples but one really stuck with me. It happened more than fifteen years ago while I was serving my previous church. Our women fellowship was performing an old radio drama and I was the one who got to make all the different sound affects. We had

some much fun with it. But I was in for a case of spiritual whiplash. Just minutes into the fellowship part of the event I was called out by one of our secretaries. She had just received a call from a couple who had been married in our church several years before. They were about a week from expecting their second child. They had gone for the final ultrasound and learned that the baby's heart was not longer beating. They were headed off the hospital to deliver the still born baby and they wanted one of the pastors to meet them there.

You can't imagine how hard I worked at trying to get a hold of my colleague. I felt woefully unequipped to handle this particular situation. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't imagine that I'd be able to do anything other than screw it up. But what I wasn't able to do was get in touch with my colleague.

So off to the hospital I headed. I'm not sure I've ever prayed as hard as I did during that car ride. When I arrived, I met with the parents...still not knowing what to say. But I listened...I answered their questions...I assured them that God loved them...and I didn't try to make sense out of the whole thing.

The nurse came in to say that they were going to induce the delivery...and I would need to wait outside until after the child was delivered so that I could baptize her. Baptize? Panic struck a second time. What do you say...what do you do...when baptizing a child who is not alive? I made another whole round of phone calls with little results.

They put me in the nurse's lounge to wait...and one of the nurses came in and started talking to me. She told me that it was a fairly recent thing that parents would ever have the opportunity to hold their still born child, or name her, or have her baptized. It used to be that the child would be immediately swept away after delivery.

An hour or so later, I was called back into the room. The mother was holding her child. The nurse had filled one of those little vomit buckets up with water for me to use for the baptism. I was totally panicked. I wasn't sure that I wasn't going to need a vomit bucket. The nurse took the child and put her in my arms. I knew immediately that even though this young girl would never fully know the gift of life that she already well knew the gift of God's grace...and that's what I said.

A few days later, in preparation for the burial, I hooked this mother up with another woman in my church who I knew had shared a similar experience. Over the next month or two, these two

connected with a few other mothers with similar experiences. Before I knew it we were planning a special service for parents who had experienced the death of a child.

Our first such service was held on the evening of children's Sunday. It was attended by thirty to forty people. During the service, all the parents were invited to come forward and light a candle in memory of their child. It was an amazing worship experience.

During our fellowship time afterwards, I had another mother of a still born child come up to me and told me that lighting that candle was the first time she had ever said her child's name out loud in front of anyone other than the husband. She felt for the first time that her grief for that child was legitimized. She felt for the first time that her child was in God's care.

That evening in the hospital I was filled with faithful discomfort. Nothing felt right, I felt completely incompetent and wished it could have been anybody but me. What amazes me is how the ripples of God's grace that I so desperately needed spread out and touched so many other lives. Sometimes our task is to follow God's call even when it is uncomfortable.

At Friday night's coffeehouse – (And how about Friday night's coffeehouse, was that not just an incredibly fun night?)...At Friday night's coffeehouse, Kristen Graves introduced one of her songs by saying that it's one of my favorites. Very true. I love the music to the song. As a matter of fact, I exercise to it most every day. But it is the words which truly capture my soul. This song entitled "Alone" is the modern day story of a reluctant prophet. It starts with the young women feeling very alone. "She walked alone through bird-singing trees reciting her poems. Her words spoke true, but honesty darkened her bright afternoon. As doubt eased in and she thought that she might be crazy again." She wonders where the people are who will speak the truth she knows, but all seems to be silent. And then a realization comes to her: "So where are they – the modern day prophets that come to liberate. That's me she said and ran home to find her own notebook and pen. Well, look at me, holding my pen with another song to sing." The woman in the song realizes that she couldn't put off the responsibility on others. Sometimes we alone have the responsibility to speak or act in a way that is responsive to God's call.

Famed preacher, Tony Campolo, tells yet another story of a reluctant, resistant prophet:

I have a friend whose name is Mike Yaconelli. He had a deacon in his church who didn't "deak!" You know what that's like. He just didn't do what he was supposed to do as a deacon. One day he said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people that go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home and at least do that?" The deacon agreed.

The first Sunday the deacon was at the old folks home, he was in the back with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down and here was this old man in a wheelchair. He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the service. The next month that was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon. The next month, the next month, and the next month. Then the old man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's alright."

The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings. As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved by this that tears began to run down his cheeks. He stumbled out of the room and as he did so he bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time."

The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?"

She said, "Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. 'He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.'"

Faithfulness isn't really faithfulness until it stretches us into the unknown. Sometimes life does that by itself. But sometimes we are faced with the choice. I can't promise you it will always be easy or comfortable, and I certainly can't promise you it will always be successful. But I can assure you that such faithful discomfort leads you to amazing experiences of God's grace. Amen.