

January 17: 13:1-27, 16:1-21

Introduction:

Well, People of God, we're back in Jeremiah, where we'll be for awhile. And the section we're talking about today is interesting for a couple of reasons. We're going to see Jeremiah take up a major prophetic mode of communication, one that can be powerful for those who get it...although I'm not sure how many people ever did, when a prophet took it up? So we'll talk about that.

And I think the passage that was read to us actually invites us to consider obedience, and how costly listening to God--obeying God--can be. Or if not costly, at least a real hassle. So. Let's pray.

Prayer:

On Speech Acts:

The prophets communicate what God wants and what will happen in the future in various ways, right? The prophets will have visions, and write down the things that they've seen, and--most of the time--go on to translate these visions into the oracles of salvation or oracles of woe or lawsuits or blessings or judgments that God has given the prophet to say. Standard prophet stuff.

They present divine lawsuits, where God brings a case against Israel or humanity or some other people

group, and all creation is called into play as the witness against whoever is being charged. These are intense. Jeremiah has these.

The prophets will act out the message that they're going to give in a way that demands attention, causes ridicule, invites gossip. They do things you can't look away from: lay naked and burn their own poo for fuel. Marry and divorce women no faithful Israelite man would go near. They tear their clothes. They act out what it is they're trying to communicate, and their behavior becomes symbolic of what it is they're trying to say. They're charged with doing this or doing that, which is meant to mean something to anyone who actually notices. These are called "speech-acts," symbolic behaviors, acted out, that powerfully communicate to those paying attention. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Major Prophets, have some of the most famous of these things, but the Minor Prophets held their own. Hosea's book is built around one.

Visions and divine-charges are nothing to scoff at, but we're used to them, honestly. It's the speech-acts that can still get our attention.

Today we're talking about some of the speech-acts Jeremiah takes on, is commanded to perform. I want to talk about the whole thing with the belt that was read to us, but first I want to talk about a small series of speech-acts that comes in chapter 16.

Sixteen's Speech Acts: Marriage, Funerals, Parties

Then the word of the Lord came to me: 2 "You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place." 3 For this is what the Lord says about the sons and daughters born in this land and about the women who are their mothers and the men who are their fathers: 4 "They will die of deadly diseases. They will not be mourned or buried but will be like dung lying on the ground. They will perish by sword and famine, and their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals."

In short, Jeremiah's told that he cannot marry, cannot father children, because everyone around him will die, and they will all die, too. Again, we know that Assyria's on the doorstep, that Judea has ignored the negative example of Israel, that God keeps calling them to return to him, while self-interested leaders say there's nothing to worry about. Jeremiah's commanded singleness is a speech-act, meant to reveal to those who notice it, those who "have ears to hear and eyes to see," who care enough to ask why this mature Jewish guy is single, which was weird then, they can discover: Jeremiah is single as a warning to Israel.

This is a hard demand on him. We think of God demanding that Jeremiah not marry, not have

children, as a hard demand. But...I, at least, get it, a little. Because Jeremiah knows that even if he were to marry and raise children, his family would all die and be left unburied, would be part of the coming genocide and exile of Judea. So, it's hard news, and I don't want to discount it, but I think it has to be tempered, in Jeremiah's mind, knowing what he knows about what will come to the families who are alive when exile arrives.

And this is followed up, here, by a double demand that builds on this. Because of the destruction that Judea is like, dancing with jazz hands into, Jeremiah is told: "Do not enter a house where there is a funeral meal; do not go to mourn or show sympathy." He's told, "and do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink."

He's supposed to avoid funerals and feasting, because these things are going to disappear from Judea. And he's not just supposed to do these things, he's got to communicate the message that goes along with them. And if people ask "Why is this happening?" Jeremiah will tell them, "you have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors," who weren't very faithful anyway. Jeremiah will basically tell them all the things that he's told them already: "It's all because you won't stop rejecting God and your purpose as God's People."

But God ends this set of demands on Jeremiah by telling him that if people ask, be sure to let them know

some good news, too. That someday, God will restore His People to the land they're in. And when that day comes, it'll be such a basic fact of what it means to be God's People that they'll use it as shorthand for whatever's true. We might say, "Is the Pope Catholic?" They'll say, "Did God bring Israel out of Egypt and back from Exile?"

But, look. As far as we know, Jeremiah never actually got to say this stuff to people. And that makes sense, because, like...the last person you want at a funeral is the one talking about how God is going to leave everyone killed and unburied on the ground, and the last person you want at your party is the guy telling everyone about how nobody's going to be feasting once we're all slaughtered.

So it strikes me that this set of speech-acts, this no-more-parties and no-more-funerals and you can't-get-married set of acts meant to communicate truth about Judea's future, that these may not be the easiest for us to relate to. In fact, we can kind of understand them as inconsequential, in the sense that what Jeremiah was prohibited from doing weren't things he was likely going to do anyway. Few people want to raise kids knowing for sure that their fate is to be slaughtered in their youth, and he had already ostracized himself from his community and its invitations.

And so it's today's passage, with it's seemingly

irrelevant speech-act, that that I think we can actually draw the most lessons from. It's a passage that calls Jeremiah to do something that makes no sense at all, unlike these other things which kind of do, and is a practical inconvenience to boot--he has to act, rather than not act, which is what we just saw.

Here was today's passage:

Thirteen's Speech-Act: Belt

13 This is what the Lord said to me: "Go and buy a linen belt and put it around your waist, but do not let it touch water." 2 So I bought a belt, as the Lord directed, and put it around my waist.

So. Jeremiah is called to buy an expensive belt, to wear it carefully. Belt's fine; this was like, a strip of cloth you'd use as a wrap around your body. It'd be hard to keep it dry, frankly. And Jeremiah has to wear it for awhile; it's going to get dirty. He can't wash it. It'll just get more and more gross, you know? (So Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown 1997).

3 Then the word of the Lord came to me a second time: 4 "Take the belt you bought and are wearing around your waist, and go now to Perath[a] and hide it there in a crevice in the rocks." 5 So I went and hid it at Perath, as the Lord told me.

Now, God tells Jeremiah to go someplace. The NIV writes “Perath,” here. Perath is...tricky to pin down. It could be a reference to a place near Jericho, a seasonal stream--wadi--that’s only about a day’s walk from Jerusalem. Maybe it’s a reference to Ephratha, which was Bethlehem’s first name, and, you know, less than ten miles away from Jerusalem. Some of our translations put “Euphrates,” here. That’s actually probably right, although not completely solidly right. Generally when this word shows up it means the Euphrates River...but usually, it has the word “river” explicitly there (ibid.) So. The Euphrates was much, much longer a journey for Jeremiah than these other two options would have been. But, it was the boundary of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, and they play so much in the story of Jeremiah that this does sort of make sense to me, especially as we continue.

You can imagine, if you want, that this is a little hassle for Jeremiah. He has to take this belt that he’s been carefully wearing, making sure it never gets wet, trying to keep it as tidy as he can because it can’t get dirty, and he has to go and walk a day to someplace, find a crevice in a rock--not hard, given the terrain--and stuff it in there. It’s a small hassle, but...a hassle. And it’s something that he has to do without any explanation given for why he has to do it. He’s already bought an expensive belt, babied it, and now he’s told to bury it after an all-day hike, all without any reason given.

Or, you can imagine, if you like, and I do think I'm here, that he has to trek over 300 miles to do this same thing, do something that totally disrupts his life, his work, his time, everything. He has to move carefully, avoiding dangerous people and dangerous places, all to put this belt in the ground near the far border of those two empires that God will use in Israel's judgment. Whether you see this as a convenience or a major life disruption, whatever, but regardless: He's given no reason for it.

6 Many days later the Lord said to me, "Go now to Perath and get the belt I told you to hide there." 7 So I went to Perath and dug up the belt and took it from the place where I had hidden it, but now it was ruined and completely useless.

And time passes. Either he's made the year-long journey back from the Euphrates to Jerusalem, or he's made the day-long journey back to Jerusalem, but he's been back. And he hears, after sometime, "Go get the belt." So, again: Either a year-long hike, or a day, but no reason is given. Just "Go." And he goes. And the belt hasn't turned into gold or taken on magic powers. It's just a dirty, trashed belt. And then, again, he has to return back to his home, now protecting a garbage belt, and again, either all day, or all year. I still am on the side of the year. An inconvenience or a major disruption.

8 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 9 “This is what the Lord says: ‘In the same way I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. 10 These wicked people, who refuse to listen to my words, who follow the stubbornness of their hearts and go after other gods to serve and worship them, will be like this belt—completely useless! 11 For as a belt is bound around the waist, so I bound all the people of Israel and all the people of Judah to me,’ declares the Lord, ‘to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened.’

All this to discover that the belt is a symbol of God’s People. You imagine, if he’s been gone a year, him marching into the city and declaring this “Look at my garbage belt! This is you!” “God cared for you, treated you with favor and attention, and now you’ve become useless.” They’re like. “Where have you been? It was so nice and quiet while you were gone.” If he’s been out to the Euphrates and back, it’s symbolic of that same exile that Israel is going to experience; a terrible bonus meaning (Miller, 2001).

Points:

It is not hard to leap from this moment in Jeremiah’s life to our own, far-removed, situation. To be a Christian is to live as a speech-act all the time. And it’s to be open to having your life examined, used as a

teaching tool for whatever God wants to communicate.

To be a Christian, open to the Spirit's leading, is to be asked by God to do things, the purpose of which isn't always clear. It's to be open to both day-long inconveniences and dramatic, life-interrupting side-quests. It's to sometimes do something that is incredibly faithful, but which no one really notices or appreciates.

Again, to be a Christian, open to the Spirit's leading, is to be asked by God to do things, the purpose of which isn't always clear. It's to be open to both day-long inconveniences and dramatic, life-interrupting missions. It's to sometimes do something that is incredibly faithful, but which no one really notices or appreciates.

Asks:

I would ask us to consider just a few things from today's passage:

What is God asking of us right now? Does it make sense or not, and how will we respond irregardless? If we don't believe God is asking anything of us right now, we are not paying attention to our lives.

Is listening to God, obeying God, inconveniencing us or even disrupting our life plans right now? If not, are we willing to be disrupted or inconvenienced?

In what ways are we faithful, obedient to Christ, and no one seems to notice or care? In what ways are we faithful and obedient and making no visible impact on anyone? We have to understand that we are not called to impact, but are called to faithfulness. We have to take heart in that if we're going to survive the intersection of God's call and life's troubles.

Again, to be a Christian, open to the Spirit's leading, is to be asked by God to do things, the purpose of which isn't always clear. It's to be open to both day-long inconveniences and dramatic, life-interrupting missions. It's to sometimes do something that is incredibly faithful, but which no one really notices or appreciates. And we are Christians. We are meant to lean on the Spirit who will sustain us, even as Jeremiah was sustained through the hard demands God placed upon him. And let's discern ways to sustain each other, too. In that way, at least, our faithfulness can be seen.