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## The Struggle is Real

### *Matthew 10:24-39*

*24“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! 26“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; 33but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. 34“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. 37Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

### *Jeremiah 20:7-13*

*7O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. 8For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 9If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. 10For I hear many whispering: “Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!” All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. “Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.” 11But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. 12O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. 13Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.*

As some of you know, I visit the county jail in Dover several times each month to meet with immigrant detainees. On a given Wednesday I may see ten to fifteen persons awaiting a hearing on their asylum applications, trying to connect with legal counsel, preparing to ask

a judge for a bail hearing or waiting, sometimes for months, for their eventual deportation to the country of their birth. Their stories of what they left behind and their journey here are often heartbreaking. Our visitation team does not stand in judgement of how or why they arrived to this country: what we do is to see each man and woman we meet as the human beings they are -- created in God's image just like you and me. I see mainly those men and women from Latin America. When I ask how they are doing, one of the answers I hear in Spanish is: *en la lucha*. It is a colloquial way to say: in the struggle. Struggling, living, surviving for another day.

Struggle is a word familiar to us. We might struggle to learn a new process or software platform at work. Get settled into a new place with new faces. Struggle to remember the names of people and the details of events that happened not so long ago. Struggle with change in general, wishing that things were the way they used to be. We struggle with disease and illness, self-doubts, insecurities, addiction and recovery, and new stages of life and the passing of time, I.e., getting older.

And we can struggle with our belief and relationship with God. This "faith thing" does not come easy to every believer all the time and it probably never should be. I will often hear from those who reach out: I'm in a tough place. I'm stuck. Lost. Discouraged. God's gone quiet. I still love God but the love of neighbor part -- especially the love the enemy part of what Jesus said -- I'm really having trouble with that.

If you count yourself as one who struggles from time to time, then do I have an Old Testament prophet for you: Jeremiah.

We read in the reflections at the front of the worship bulletin, that Jeremiah was strongly rejected by the leaders and many of the people. Attempts were made on his life. Jeremiah became the model for martyrs and others whose witness to God earned them persecution and even death.

Jeremiah was Temple prophet and close to political and religious power. He had the status of one of God's interlocutors and had the King's ear. Think of an advisor to an American president who worked only feet away from the Oval Office. He began his life as a prophet at the center of power in the shadow of the Temple: his life ended far away from that power and alone. He rose and he fell.

Why should we care about Old Testament prophets when the parables and teachings of Jesus are far more approachable and digestible? (With the possible exception of today's challenging gospel). One of the reasons is their raw honesty that can sometimes be lacking in polite religion. They tell it like it is. They call out people's bad behavior, unfaithfulness, cruelty, and apathy. And reading them in today's world can remind us that the problems and challenges we think are unique to us and have never been seen before -- well, maybe there is some wisdom to be drawn from the past. Not everything under to sun is new. It's probably just different.

In one of my previous churches there was a movement to place a Suggestion Box at the back of the church. The aim, at least at the start, was to collect ideas about how we might improve the worship experience and reach out the community, or to suggest favorite hymns to sing. What started out as a 'Suggestion Box' really turned out to be a 'Complaint Box.' People write down: Sermons were too long or too short or not topical enough or not Biblical enough. Children made too much noise in church. The announcements went on too long and people did not bring enough food for coffee hour or potluck dinners.

Suggestions can become complaints.

On a given Sunday morning, the prophets of the Old Testament are not always easy to understand and digest. Their oracles and laments and poetry do not make for easy or comforting bedtime reading. Many times, what they do is list the many things that are going wrong or are decline. Prophets speak out about how angry God is about that state of things. Yet however bad things are and going to get, they never lose their trust in God and hope for the future. We might say today, that was the prophet's superpower.

Which brings us to Jeremiah – a prophet of lament, complaint, struggle, and hope.

In Jeremiah's day – as in our own day -- there was political upheaval, the overturning of long-standing national and religious institutions and the dislocation of entire populations. There were rising powers and declining empires.

What was he concerned about? Social justice, i.e., care and concern for the most vulnerable in society. This is what the prophets always cared about, and their words serve as a perennial challenge and test for us today. How we care changes with every generation, as individuals, governments, churches, and charities have all played a role.

Jeremiah also cared that worship was not watered down or mixed with other gods and religions. But as important as right worship was for him, he cared more about how people were being treated than how prayers and sacrifices were being offered. It is the constant tension of yesterday, and I would suggest today. What good is a world where beautiful prayers and hymns are offered to the Almighty, while at the same time our backs are turned and our hearts hardened to human suffering a need.

Prophets often land in trouble, as did Jeremiah, complaining about the way the world was becoming and how people were living.

What makes him different is how he also turned his complaints towards God.

Having been called as a young man to serve God and now he says: v. 70 Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. As one commentator (Tyler Mayfield) writes: he feels deceived by God. When things got bad for Jeremiah he turned on others. "All my close friends are watching for me to stumble."

To my ears this sounds real and honest.

How many times has this kind of prayer conversation taken place? I believe in you God. You have made everything possible: my life, love, family, a roof over my head and food to eat. And then, the floor drops out from under my feet: tragedy, heartbreak, betrayal. It also can be less dramatic: aging, isolation, irrelevance, conflict.

The steady relationship we thought we had with God comes into play by the response to life as it unfolds. Some believers enter long and quiet dry spells.

Jeremiah shows us that to struggle is to live.

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, whose play inspired the musical *My Fair Lady*, offered this insight from a Native American elder, who described his own inner struggles like this: "Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time. When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, The one I feed the most."

When we are most real, vulnerable, tired, discouraged, and afraid, that is often when the truth pours in. A lament and a complaint for Jeremiah is followed up in the end with thanksgiving: v. 13 Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! He was confident in God's ultimate concern and protection of him. He never loses hope in the God who never deserts him.

*En la lucha* – in the struggle – I hear from those I visit at the jail. The struggle is real.

We can draw a line from Jeremiah to Jesus. Jesus saw the struggle going in the hearts of those who listened to him but were unsure if they could put their trust in him.

Jesus did not want a slice or portion of their lives, he wanted their all. V. 38 "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Feed the good within us and the world will see and know who reigns forever and where love begins.