**Providing Extra Dessert for the Pastor**

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

John 1:1-9

You are probably wondering about my sermon title today, “Providing Extra Dessert for the Pastor.” Here you are on a diet from all the food you have eaten over the past few weeks. You are pushing yourself away from the table, trying to lose those pounds you picked up. You have given away any remaining Christmas cookies so as not to be tempted. You may have even taken out a membership at the Y or a fitness club, promising to get in shape so that your clothes fit again. You are doing all these things to lose weight and the pastor is proposing that he should be given an extra desert.

Let me be clear. This was not my idea. It comes directly from our Scripture today, so if you have an issue with the pastor getting extra desert while you are on a diet, you best take it up with Jeremiah. The passage comes from a portion the prophetic writing often referred to as the book of consolation. For the most part, Jeremiah spends his 40 years of prophetic ministry warning the people of Israel that their continued reliance on military alliances and the economic inequalities built around those alliances will ultimately lead to their destruction. Jeremiah offers bad news after bad news, but right in the middle of all his warnings comes these three chapters speaking about God’s grace and God’s renewal. Here is how our text concludes this morning: “I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord”.

You may quibble with me and argue that Jeremiah doesn’t exactly call for extra desert for the pastor, he just says the “priests will be given their fill of fatness.” But, I think a reasonable translation is “give the pastor extra desert”. Just yesterday I was meeting with folks in our Salvadoran Partnership as we talked about this year’s service in honor of Oscar Romero and what type of meal we would have afterward. Wayne Bjorlie reminded us that last year he made flan and I was reminded that last year I did not get any flan. Jeremiah would not approve. Give the Priest their fill of fatness or at the very least make sure they get some flan, better yet two flan.

Now why is this important for the prophet Jeremiah? What possible reason could the prophet have for wanting priests or pastors to get extra desert? I have a sister who spent a number of years in the Sudan doing volunteer work for the Mennonites. After completing a three year term, my sister and her husband came back to the states before beginning another round of volunteer work in Tanzania. On their return trip they had an opportunity to visit the Sudan where they previously served. Upon seeing my sister, some of the people exclaimed, quite enthusiastically, “You’ve gotten fat.” Back in the states or many Western parts of the world, this would hardly be seen as a complement. But, the people telling my sister she was fat were saying you look good, you look healthy. Sudanese know the reality of hunger. A person who has gained weight is a person who is doing well.

Jeremiah, like all prophets, utilizes symbols and symbolic actions to talk about how God is present in our world. It was Jeremiah who spent hours observing a potter and then said to the people, “O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel” ([Jeremiah 18:6](http://www.lds.org/scriptures/ot/jer/18.6?lang=eng)).” It was Jeremiah who later took a clay pot and shattered it in front of the people saying this is what will happen to those who turn away from the justice of God. It was Jeremiah who created an animal’s yoke and wore it over his neck in front of the Kings in the region warning them against turning to war as a way of avoiding the bondage of Babylon. Prophet’s utilize symbolic actions, which is why Jeremiah says give the pastor extra desert.

For Jeremiah a well fed pastor, like for my sisters’ Sudanese friends, is a symbol of well being and provides a prophetic challenge to the myth of empires that there is never enough for everyone. Empires insist there is a shortage of mercy, a shortage of forgiveness, a shortage of love, a shortage of justice, a shortage of food, a shortage of jobs. Someone has to go without. Empires like Babylon, like Rome, like Britain, like the U.S., like China, like Russia, are organized around the premise that there is never enough. Because there is never enough we are forced to identify those who must be turned away.

Police officers in New York City turn their backs on Mayor DeBlasio because there is not enough mercy. Protestors hurl insults at the police because there is not enough compassion. Palestinians and Israel remain in constant conflict because there is not enough forgiveness. When it comes to health care, the young are pitted against the elderly on the belief there is not enough healing. Immigration reform remains stalled because there is not enough empathy. This past week I received a letter from a UCC pastor in Northern Minnesota who disagreed with the resolution on racial justice our congregation put before the Minnesota UCC Conference last June. He believes that unless we also talk about the inequities being felt by folks in greater Minnesota we cannot speak about racial justice. His argument is based on the premise there is not enough justice for everyone. Someone has to go without.

If you believe, as the prophet believes, that God is a God of abundant mercy, abundant forgiveness, abundant love, abundant justice, abundant grace, how do you challenge a conviction and a system based on the premise of scarcity. One option is to fatten up the pastor as a symbol of God’s abundance. But, another option is for the community of faith to be a place of resistance to scarcity, where in spite of the dominant message of shortage, we insist we have all the love we need right here, we have all the forgiveness we need right here, we have all the justice and compassion we need right here to make a difference.

We have no need to be big powerful empires, big powerful corporations, big powerful anything to make a difference. God gathers us into these small communities of resistance, from the north and the south, the East and the West and God says you will be the agents of my abundance. You will be a place where there is more than enough for the most vulnerable among you, the mother in labor, the small child, the lame and the blind. No one is left out. Everyone is included.

If it were only up to us and our resources, our limited talents, our limited abilities, out limited energy, our limited finances, we would never have enough. The need is too great. But, the prophet knows God’s abundance has nothing to do with our limitations and everything to do with God’s presence in our world, whose birth we celebrate and as John says in his Gospel is the true light, which enlightens everyone.

I do think it’s a good idea to provide the pastor with an extra desert. But, even more important than the symbolic action of an extra desert for the pastor is living as a community of faith, sharing generously the abundance given to us by God.

**Jeremiah 31: 7-14**

*Jeremiah is a prophet who spent most of his 40 years of prophetic ministry warning the people about impending disaster unless they dramatically change their ways. Our text today comes is from a small section in Jeremiah that interrupts those warnings, with the strong reminder that no matter what happens, no matter how bad things might look, God remains the God of abundant mercy, love and grace.*

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

**John 1:1-9**

*In our second lesson John offers us this beautiful poetic and much loved language about how God is present in our world. John has no birth story for Jesus, but for John, Jesus does have a beginning and that beginning is with God.*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.