

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / October 11, 2020 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Jeremiah: Faithful Sermon Series
Faithful Love (Jeremiah 3-6)

Living among people who frustrate

Good morning. Let's ask for God's help in prayer...

It's so great to see Chappy Dave and Sandee and to hear included in your report some good news of God's work, so thank you! It's good to hear some good news, especially as many are frustrated and heartbroken about things going on today.

2020 has been a time with plenty of frustrations. People's lists differ, but let me share some common ones. Perhaps you're frustrated with one of our presidential candidates, or with both, or frustrated about what's going on in our country with issues of race, racism, and injustice, or frustrated about an influential Christian whose teachings on sex and marriage go against your views, or frustrated about how local or church leaders are responding to COVID, or frustrated as you see Christians lose the beauty of the gospel in the intensity of their political passions, maybe even frustrated by the person sitting next to you right now on your couch, or here.

As you know, it's difficult to respond well when dealing with people who frustrate us. I think we could all use some help with this, I know that I definitely do.

If there's anyone who knows about living in frustrating, heartbreaking times, it's Jeremiah. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to Old Testament book of Jeremiah, chapter 4. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

This morning's passage has a lot of challenging and intense things in it as we see what Jeremiah has to teach us about responding to people who frustrate. So if you've got young kids with you, we'll be referencing some ugly things that happened in Jeremiah's day, and also in ours in an interview after the message.

Now the prophet Jeremiah was born about 650 years before Jesus, after the nation of Israel had split into two kingdoms, specifically born towards the end of King Manasseh's reign. The book of 2 Kings tells us that Manasseh ruled for 55 years as Judah's most wicked king, encouraging dark worship as he built pagan altars throughout the countryside and even in God's temple. Worship that included bowing down before idols, cult prostitutes, dark magic, omens,

and mediums. Manasseh even burned his own son alive as an offering to a false god and led the people to do more evil than the nations around them. Jeremiah grew up in that environment.

After Manasseh died, his son Amnon followed his father's wicked ways, until he was murdered by some of his officials, who were then also murdered. Then the boy king Josiah, Amnon's son, was put on the throne.

Josiah's family tree had some rotten limbs, yet remarkably, as Josiah grew up, he had God's temple repaired and got rid of pagan altars. So after over a half century of darkness, things were starting to look up, and Jeremiah sought to lead reform efforts among the people. But sadly, the people instead continued their wicked ways.

Jeremiah chapters 3 and 4 talk about how even though Judah had seen Israel suffer catastrophe for worshipping false gods and practicing evil, Judah still continues to prostitute themselves before false gods and practice all the evil they can. Chapter 5 says their evil is in all social classes, a society rotten from top to bottom, so much that Jeremiah cannot find in the streets of Jerusalem a single person who deals honestly.

Chapters 5 and 6 go on to say that the people were acting violently, slandering others, swearing falsely, sleeping with prostitutes and married neighbors, oppressing the poor, and listening enthusiastically to false prophets who said everything was going to be fine, while totally disregarding God's repeated warnings. The people's continuing evil and stubborn refusal to obey became so bad that they felt no conviction or shame no matter how wickedly they acted. This is the heartbreaking, frustrating society that Jeremiah ministers to.

Teaching: Jeremiah's response to people who frustrate

Faithfully sharing about God (invitation to turn back to God & dangers of staying turned away)

But no matter how much the people act in frustrating ways, Jeremiah keeps faithfully sharing about God.

In chapter 3 and early in chapter 4, Jeremiah's sharing about God focuses on a variety of verbal forms of the Hebrew word *shub* (שוב). It's simplest meaning is "to turn", and Jeremiah "turns it" all kinds of ways.

Jeremiah repeats various verbal forms of *shub* fifteen times in this section,¹ as he keeps faithfully calling the people to turn away from worshipping false gods and turn away from

¹ Christopher Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*

practicing evil and turn back to God and return to His loving ways. Over and over, Jeremiah uses *shub* to call the people to turn, including in verse one of chapter 4. It says: **(1-4)**

⁴ “If you, Israel, will return, then return to me,” declares the LORD.

“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray,

² and if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ then the nations will invoke blessings by him and in him they will boast.”

³ This is what the LORD says to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem:

“Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns.

⁴ Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts,

you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,

or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire

because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.

In these verses, Jeremiah shares God’s invitation to turn away from their false worship and wicked ways and return to God and His good ways. If they do, then grace will triumph and God will bless the people in a way, as verse 2 says, that even the nations around will take note.

But the people must break up the unplowed ground of their hearts, as verse 3 says, by returning to God and His ways. Otherwise their sinful hearts will continue to be like hard ground unable to receive the blessing of the rain, missing out on God’s favor in their lives.

And Jeremiah warns about the dangers of continuing to worship false gods and do all kinds of evil. In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Jeremiah faithfully shares about the grave dangers of continuing to turn away from God and His good ways.

You may be among those uncomfortable with God disciplining people for their sin, but the Bible teaches that it flows from His perfect justice and love. To name just one of their sins, chapter 5 talks about the people of Judah setting traps that enslave the poor, taking advantage of them and taking the little that they have to grow even richer.

God is rightly angry about this abuse against poor people whom He loves, and God is rightly angry about these abusers committing treason against Him as they leverage His gifts to disobey His commands and abuse the poor, and God is even rightly angry about how these abusers are deforming themselves as they keep abusing. And so when evil continues to destroy what God holds so precious, over and over and over, God eventually acts to oppose that evil.

From the beginning of Manasseh’s evil reign through Jeremiah’s years of faithful reform efforts, there’s over 80 straight years of evil before God begins to bring judgment. Over 80 years

of no remorse over worshipping false gods, and acting violently, and slandering, and swearing falsely, and sleeping with prostitutes and married neighbors, and oppressing and taking advantage of the poor, to name just some of their continual evil practices.

Tragically, the people of Judah have sunk so low while at the same time being so stubbornly resistant to God's warnings, that God is on the verge of severe discipline. Jeremiah warns about it repeatedly in chapters 4-6. To get a sense of these intense warnings, look in chapter 4, starting in verse 14. Here Jeremiah proclaims: **(14-18)**

¹⁴ Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved.

How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?

¹⁵ A voice is announcing from Dan,

proclaiming disaster from the hills of Ephraim.

¹⁶ "Tell this to the nations, proclaim concerning Jerusalem:

'A besieging army is coming from a distant land,

raising a war cry against the cities of Judah.

¹⁷ They surround her like men guarding a field,

because she has rebelled against me,'" declares the LORD.

¹⁸ "Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you.

This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!"

That's intense. Jeremiah warns the people that if they continue to ignore God's warnings and persist in their continuous evil, then an enemy nation will inflict great evil on them, as they have done. A destruction so complete that it will be like a reversal of creation, which Jeremiah warns about starting in verse 23 of chapter 4. **(23-26)**

²³ I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens, and their light was gone.

²⁴ I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking;
all the hills were swaying.

²⁵ I looked, and there were no people;
every bird in the sky had flown away.

²⁶ I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert;
all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

We see here that Jeremiah faithfully shares whatever God calls Him to share, no matter how unpopular. Jeremiah kept courageously sharing these hard truths for a couple of decades as the people kept stubbornly rejecting his warnings. Talk about frustrating.

If you read through the Old Testament, there are points like in these chapters, where you may think about the people, “how stupid can they get?” And maybe today you look at certain individuals, or groups, and are also tempted to think, “how stupid can they get?”.

Perhaps a person or group who keeps saying or posting online insensitive or even hateful things about people like you or about an issue you’re passionate about, and you’re getting so frustrated.

In the past, when you’ve scrolled through social media, and you see that some embarrassment or harm has come to those who frustrate you, what goes on in your or my heart?

In loving anguish – While Jeremiah no doubt felt frustration, we’ll see what’s in his heart about these people, starting in verse 19 of chapter 4. Remember, this passage falls in-between the two warning passages we read earlier. Verse 19 of chapter 4: **(19-20)**

Oh, my anguish, my anguish!

I writhe in pain.

Oh, the agony of my heart!

My heart pounds within me,

I cannot keep silent.

For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;

I have heard the battle cry.

²⁰ Disaster follows disaster;

the whole land lies in ruins.

In an instant my tents are destroyed,

my shelter in a moment.

In these verses, Jeremiah does not gloat about wicked Judah finally getting what they deserve, there’s no “it’s about time these people got what’s coming to ‘em.” And though Jeremiah was right, it’s not his delight to show how much smarter and wiser he is or to gloat about just how stupid and immoral the people are. And though the people have been ignoring Jeremiah for decades, and living in ways that disturb him, Jeremiah does not forsake the people that God has called him to love.

Now there’s definitely a time and place to remove yourself from a bad situation. But because God calls Jeremiah to stay, Jeremiah stays among these frustrating people and keeps seeking to warn them and to win them over, having his fate tied to theirs.

Here in verses 19-20 Jeremiah is in loving anguish for Judah, pouring out his grief about the coming judgment, great turmoil in his heart. In another verse in chapter 4,² Jeremiah wrestles with God over his confusion about the coming judgment. And later in the book Jeremiah wrestles with God over why God gave him such a hard calling.

For this is a costly ministry for Jeremiah, yet he continues in it faithfully. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, because a true prophet weeps their warnings of judgment, longing for the people to instead turn to God so they won't be fulfilled. And so are we sad when misfortune comes to those who frustrate us, or are we glad?

Through it all Jeremiah also conveyed hope, never giving up on these seemingly hopeless people, continuing to see the possibility of something better for them, as he keeps inviting them to turn to God. And so do we see the possibility of something better for those we find frustrating?

We're not prophets to Judah, but if you identify as a follower of Jesus, you are His representative, and He's given you the stewardship of the people that you are around and in relationship with. There are going to be times when He leads you to share a challenging truth with others about Him and His ways, about what is right and what is wrong, which is harder for some of us than for others.

When you're led to share that challenging truth whether in person, or online, seek to do it with a loving heart like Jeremiah's, even when sharing with someone so frustrating. This is so tough, especially for those of us who have been wounded so deeply.

And I'm no Jeremiah, I'm a fellow struggler asking for God's forgiveness and for His help in having more of this faithful love towards those who frustrate. How was Jeremiah able to love like this? I think it's about Jeremiah's deep connection to the God Who has an amazingly faithful love for frustrating people.

Because of God's faithful love – An example of God's faithful love is in chapter 3, starting in verse 12, where God has a message for these frustrating people: **(12-20)**

¹² Go, proclaim this message toward the north:

“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD,

‘I will frown on you no longer,

² 4:10.

for I am faithful,' declares the LORD,

'I will not be angry forever.

¹³ Only acknowledge your guilt—

you have rebelled against the LORD your God,
you have scattered your favors to foreign gods
under every spreading tree,
and have not obeyed me,"

declares the LORD.

¹⁴ "Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion. ¹⁵ Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land," declares the LORD, "people will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. ¹⁷ At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the LORD, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. ¹⁸ In those days the people of Judah will join the people of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your ancestors as an inheritance.

¹⁹ "I myself said,

"How gladly would I treat you like my children
and give you a pleasant land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.'

I thought you would call me 'Father'

and not turn away from following me.

²⁰ But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,

so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,"

declares the LORD.

These verses show God is brokenhearted over the people's sin, likening His grief to that of a spouse who has been repeatedly cheated on, longing to see Judah and Israel return so that He can immediately forgive and restore and not discipline.

When God brings judgment, it comes with tears, because of His faithful love, even for people behaving so unlovely. A commentary I read about this chapter 3 passage captures all this well, saying,

“While we must affirm the Bible’s insistence on the reality of both the love of God and the anger of God, we should not regard them as equivalent. Love is an attribute of God, part of his eternal being and character. Anger is the response of God to evil and to human sin. Repentance and rejection of that evil and sin leads to the ending of the anger. God will be love eternally. God will not be angry forever. God himself says so [*in verse 12*]... Verses 12 and 13 together show us the tension within the heart of God that human sin produces. There is the powerful yearning of the merciful husband (12), alongside the profound recognition of the sheer evil of evil and the assault that it makes upon his will and integrity (13). The tension so felt and spoken by the poet tears the heart of God, who yearns, but will not be mocked, trivialized, or used. The tension would only finally be resolved when God’s heart was torn on the cross itself, when in the person of his Son Jesus Christ God took our guilt, rebellion, and disobedience upon himself and bore its just consequences.”³

Next Step

There on the cross is the ultimate expression of God’s faithful love, where He gave His heart for us, allowing it to be torn apart, so that He could forgive us and restore us to relationship with Him.

Language about God being a faithful husband is not found only in Jeremiah 3-6. It’s also in the New Testament, where the church is described as the bride of Christ, and where history culminates in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Jesus took the consequences of all our sins on our behalf, becoming vulnerable for us, absorbing all the righteous anger that we deserve. Why? So that He could win us back. So that He could make us beautiful and bring us together into a beautiful relationship with Him, as His bride.

That’s the faithful love He gives us, and it’s the kind of love that He wants us to share with others, even when we know that we’re right and they’re wrong, even when they’ve unjustly tried to make us feel wrong for affirming what is right, even when their sin harms us and those we love.

³ Christopher Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 82-83.

Sometimes, like Jeremiah, God leads us to faithfully share about Him and His ways with those who do not yet identify as His followers, or with those who do but are not walking in His ways. So when God leads, faithfully share. Speak out, including hard truths, and seek justice, but do it with faithful love. That's our next step this morning: Faithfully share with faithful love.

And when it's not according to the need of the moment to share truth, still faithfully love. Love those who think, act, and look very different from you. As I once heard a pastor say, "If you only like people who are like you, the only person you actually like is yourself."

Think about the many different kinds of neighbors we have in this city. In their beauty, and in their brokenness, no matter how much they are right, or wrong, we are called to love them all.

So love those wearing a *Make America Great Again* hat, and those with a Biden/Harris sign in their yard, and those with a *Black Lives Matter* shirt, and those in a police uniform, and those with a rainbow flag, and those wearing a hijab, and those carrying a book from your favorite Christian author, and those carrying a book from "that" Christian leader, and those wearing a hat for your team, and for its rival, and those wearing masks, and not wearing masks.

Our faithful love, reflecting the faithful love of our God, who let His heart be torn open for us on the cross while we were His enemies. That's the faithful love that God continues to pour out on us, and that Jeremiah modeled for us as he lived among a people so frustrating.

So I think we're pretty far off track as followers of Jesus when we think we can justify being unloving, in person or online, to someone who sees politics or faith or race or anything else differently than we do. May we instead bring faithful love.

Interview with Rochelle

I know this is so challenging, for me as well, but it's what we're called to as followers of Jesus. And to help us with this, Rochelle Meyer will join me up front now. Give us a sec as we get things set up for Rochelle...

If you haven't met Rochelle and her husband Jonathan yet, Rochelle has served as a missionary in various parts of the world, including places where two main groups hate each other, or where abuse is more normalized, or where people are killed just for faith in Jesus. So Rochelle is very familiar with the challenges of people who frustrate. So I'll ask her to share a few stories when God helped her to faithfully share with faithful love.

1) Sometimes the frustration comes from inside the church, so would you share about how some Christians opposed you and how God helped you with that?

2) Would you share about seeing hard things happening to kids, and how God helped you to faithfully share?

3) Would you share about God helping you to faithfully love those who did the unspeakable to your friends?

Would you join me in thanking Rochelle for sharing? Rochelle, would you pray for us to live out these things?

Dismissal - Go in peace to faithfully share with faithful love.