

Disconnect

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 7:1-11

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I. A disconnected life

So let's say there is a hypothetical pastor and this guy does all the right things on Sundays at church. He preaches good sermons that are based on the Bible. He is friendly and welcoming to guests in worship. He is caring and pastoral to the needs and concerns of the church family. He says things like, "I'm sorry to hear about that – I'll be praying for you this week." Maybe this hypothetical pastor even has a family that looks all happy and put together – like a pastor's family is supposed to look.

But what if you followed the guy around during the week and noticed some other things? Like when he's driving on Macintosh Road, crossing over Bahia Vista, on the way to Fruitville Road and somebody tries to pass him in that right lane that goes away, he speeds up and honks at the other car and yells at the other driver and maybe even gives that hand gesture that is a well-known signal of displeasure. What if you follow that hypothetical pastor to the gym down the street and notice that he spends as much time looking at the young women in their workout clothes as he does lifting weights? What if you follow him from church in the evening and find that instead of going home the hypothetical pastor goes to a bar and gets sloppy drunk? What if you follow him to the golf course on his day off and you see him throwing his golf clubs and cussing whenever he hits a poor shot? What would you think?

Even though none of us is perfect, even though we've all got our flaws, my guess is that if you witnessed those kinds of things you might think that there is a disconnect between the pastor you see on Sunday and the person you observe during the week. My guess is that you might wonder if what you see on Sundays is for real, or if it is just the guy putting on his pastor face and doing a job. You might wonder if the whole faith thing is for real for him based on how he lives his life when he's not at church.

II. Connecting with Jeremiah and the people of Judah

This morning, as we continue our sermon series entitled "The Story" in which we're working our way through the Bible and learning important lessons to help us live in ways that are pleasing to God, we turn our attention to the prophet Jeremiah. Specifically, we're going to focus on Jeremiah, chapter seven. Biblical scholars call the verses we're going to look at Jeremiah's "temple sermon." God called Jeremiah to speak these words, not only to the religious leaders, but to all the people of Judah. The Lord wanted everyone to understand that there was a disconnect between what happened when they were in the temple for worship and how they were living the rest of their lives.

First, here's a bit of background. Jeremiah lived about 100 years after the prophet Isaiah who Megan talked about last week. In the 100 years between the two prophets, lots of bad things happened to the faith practices of the people of Judah. They rebuilt the pagan worship sites that good King Hezekiah had torn down. They took for granted that since God protected them from the threat of the Assyrians, they would always have the Lord's protection. They had no problem cheating in business if it made them a little extra money. They showed little concern for the poor and the needy – those on the margins of

their society. Generally speaking, the people of Judah went through the motions of their religion without it impacting how they lived their lives. There was a major disconnect.

And God called Jeremiah to point out that disconnect. His ministry as a prophet lasted for 40 years and the entire time Jeremiah spoke a message from the Lord that the people did not want to hear. The people of Judah didn't believe that what they were doing was so bad. They thought Jeremiah was just a glass half empty kind of guy. They figured he was the type who could see a dark cloud behind every silver lining.

Can you imagine what it would have been like for Jeremiah? From the time he was very young, he had a call to speak the word of the Lord to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. But the word that he received was almost always negative. He was constantly criticizing the people and the leaders for turning away from God. He consistently warned about the death and destruction that would come if they didn't return to faith in the Lord.

Probably the hardest thing for Jeremiah was that God's word to him was true. He was the prophet whose ministry spanned the last five kings of Judah. He was the prophet who lived through the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. He witnessed the earthen ramps built to breach the walls of the city. He saw the temple destroyed and the leaders hauled away into captivity in Babylon. His heart broke with God's heart as he poured out his grief in the book of Lamentations. He witnessed the devastation and death he had warned about for forty years when it actually came to pass. Such was the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah.

III. Connecting the text with today

Our text from Jeremiah 7 is an example of his warnings to the people of Judah. Bible scholars tell us that the likely setting is at the temple in Jerusalem during a major public religious festival. Let's look at what Jeremiah had to say, beginning in verse 2:

Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

What God is critiquing through Jeremiah is the false belief that the temple was like a good luck charm or an insurance policy that guaranteed the safety of the nation of Judah. They all knew the story we learned about last week – how the Lord had literally fought for them against the invading Assyrian army one hundred years earlier and overnight 185,000 in the enemy's military camp died. What the people of Judah had convinced themselves with their "This is the temple of the Lord" chant was that as long as they showed up for the big religious holidays and went through the right motions, they had stamped their "God card" and nothing bad was going to happen to them.

We are still in danger of having that kind of magical perspective about coming to church on Sunday. Surely if we are righteous enough to drag ourselves out of bed on Sunday morning and come to church that should impress God so that nothing bad will happen to us – right? Wrong, according to Jeremiah. As we learned earlier when the Lord had the prophet Samuel anoint the next king of Israel and God selected Jesse's youngest son, David. God does not look on the outside, but on what is inside. The Lord discerns the motivations of our heart, not just the fact that we show up at church.

That was Jeremiah's perspective based on what he heard from the Lord. Here's what the prophet said next, beginning in verse 5:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

You see, in God's eyes, there is a connection between how we practice our faith on days of worship and how we conduct ourselves every other day. There is a relationship between what we say we believe and how we live out our care and concern for those who are in need. It was true when the prophet spoke to the people of Judah and it is still true today for you and for me.

That means we need to ask ourselves the question: how is what I say I believe confirmed by real actions that I take; volunteering time, sharing money, advocating in other ways for those who are in need in my community? God says through the prophet that there is a connection between what we truly care about and what we actually do. Scripture teaches that when we feed the hungry or clothe the naked or visit the prisoner, we are actually caring for Jesus himself. There is a connection.

There is a connection between experiencing the living Lord in worship and being in relationship with God every day of the week. Jeremiah drives this point home in the section that follows, beginning in verse 8:

Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!" – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.

Just the fact that there was a temple in Jerusalem and the people showed up for the prescribed religious rituals was not the main thing. Not when those same people lived in ways that were contrary to the best ways to live that God had given to Moses hundreds of years before. Jeremiah mentions five of the Ten Commandments the people were disregarding, yet they still believed, "We are safe!" Those are deceptive words.

And they are deceptive words for us today. It does matter how we live: how we treat others; how we honor God with our lives; who or what we really rely on. Do we truly believe in a living Lord with whom we can have a relationship and communication? Or is our actual faith in our technology, in science, and in the economic prosperity so many enjoy in our culture? If you can tell what is important to us by how we spend our time and our money, then what does your calendar and bank account say is your god?

Friends, there could be a big disconnect between what you seem to believe when you are here on Sunday and what happens the other six days of your week and no one here would know. You may even be able to fool people who know you well. Maybe you are even fooling yourself. But you're not fooling God. That's why the prophet ends our passage with these words from the Lord: "You know, I too am watching." If there is a disconnect in your life, God knows it and desires for you to live in a way in which every part of your life is connected and whole. May what happens here today connect with how each of us live in the coming week. Amen.