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Jeremiah 22:13-19

Luke 4:16-30

COMMONWELLTH – LIVING IN JUST AND RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS

One of the great analysts of human behavior was named Theodor Geisel. Some of you know the name by which he is primarily known. A hint: his middle name was Seuss. Yes, Dr. Seuss, that writer of children's books demonstrated great insight and communicated it in wonderfully humorous ways. In one of my favorites, "Horton Hears a Who," there is an elephant named Horton. Of course, elephants have large ears, so Horton has an ability to hear that which others could not, which in this case were the cries of distress from microscopic beings who lived on a speck of dust. Once he discovers the existence of these Whos, these tiniest of creatures, he feels some responsibility for them and he places the speck on which all of Whoville exists, on a soft clover.

But as Horton the elephant begins to express his concerns for the Whos, the other animals, not wanting to be bothered by such a possibility, begin to ridicule him for his belief that beings so small merit any attention or care. In fact, these animals actually exaggerate their behaviors that are hurting the Whos as they express their incredulity that someone believes such small matters matter. They were more interested in what was convenient and what they thought made their lives better than in what was right and fair. At one point in the story, Horton finds the clover on which the Whos live after it had been hidden by the other animals, and with great relief and urgency, he cries out: "My friends! Tell me! Do tell! Are you safe? Are you sound? Are you whole? Are you well?"¹

Are you safe? Are you sound? Are you whole? Are you well? Twice in our passage today, Jeremiah says "It was well," when certain conditions existed. The word that is translated 'well,' is not a narrow one. According to the prophet, it was well with the person in power when things were structured so that it was well for all

the people. We live in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, one of four states that uses that term. The term dates from the 15th century coming from the old meaning of ‘wealth’ which is ‘well-being.’ So commonwealth means common well-being. ² I’ve entitled this sermon series ‘Commonwellth,’ w-e-l-l-t-h to focus on the things that enable common well-being.

In our passage today, we hear Jeremiah criticize his society, and in particular its leadership, for being insensitive to the needs of the poor, at a time when the upper crust was living in luxury. Previously, the people of Judah had a king named Josiah, who had been committed in his relationship to God to making his reign one of fairness, showing dedication to the common well-being. But after his death, when his son, Jehoiakim became king, he was a ruler interested only in his own wealth and sense of importance. He was focused on his desire to be viewed as an impressive monarch who had a luxurious palace. Jeremiah was not directly harmed by this king’s actions, but much like Horton, he was keenly in tune with the well-being of others, particularly those who did not have much clout in that society. Earlier in the chapter, the little ‘Whos,’ if you will, were defined as aliens, widows, and orphans, the lowest of the low in that society. Jeremiah’s message was not a popular one and put him at some risk. But he had a heart for the poor. He was committed to just and right relationships. He understood that when a society ignores the needs of those on the fringes, then that society is not spiritually well.

Slightly over six centuries later, we hear Luke’s account of Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue. He chooses a text from Isaiah that is in accord with what we heard from Jeremiah. In the reading, God’s messenger is described as bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, a liberation of the oppressed. After reading that text, Jesus said that God’s stated purpose was being fulfilled in their presence. The first response among the synagogue crowd was positive – I can imagine people giving Mary a thumb’s up – hometown boy done good! The people of Nazareth swelled with pride in their native son. That went along with a bit of pride in themselves, as God’s chosen people. Their understanding of being selected by God was that they had special divine favor that should be coming their way. Jesus indicated that God

had chosen Israel, but had chosen them to be a special blessing to others, because God's love is broad and deep enough to embrace all the nations of the earth. To illustrate his point, Jesus employs a couple of stories from scripture about God's care extending beyond the Hebrew people to needy Gentiles. Uh-oh! The hometown crowd quickly turned on Jesus with such ferocity that his life was put at risk. The idea of just and right relationships may sound fine when described in the abstract, but when we see what it would mean in real life, that can be more challenging.

A friend of mine named Eileen tells about a time when she took her car to a Jiffy Lube to get it serviced. While she waited for the work to be done, she looked for something of interest to read in the waiting area. For some reason, in addition to the old magazines, there was a small white manual for boat owners. She was not much into boating, but considering the alternatives, she began to flip through the manual, where she found a chapter called, "The Rules of the Open Seas." There it described two kinds of vessels. One group includes vessels such as rowboats and sailboats, that have no power of their own, so their navigation is dependent on the tide, wind, and human effort. Another class of boats have motors and have the power and steering to go where they want when they want. Now when these two kinds of vessels meet on the open sea, what is to happen to avoid a collision? The rules state that the power boat that can maneuver most easily is the one that must alter its course, so that the boat with less control over its direction can make it to safe harbor. Eileen said she quickly turned to the front of the book to discover the author of this great theological treatise. Turns out it was the Department of Transportation of the state of New Jersey. ³

Now we don't live under King Jehoiakim. Neither are we synagogue members in Nazareth. So you might be asking, what does this have to do with me, preacher? Well, since you asked – you did ask didn't you? We may have a lot in common with the Nazareth synagogue crowd. We Christians are proud of Jesus. Some have Muhammad, others have Buddha, but we have Jesus, and aren't we glad he's our boy. But Jesus didn't call us to be disciples in order that we might feel like we were chosen or favored by God over others, thus inflating our egos to the extent that we

might be inclined to disparage others. Being a Christian doesn't lead to a monopoly on God's material blessings. Instead, for those of us who have some means, who can maneuver in the waters of public life, God calls us to become good news for the poor by changing course and adjusting our individual and community lifestyles, so they too can make it to safe harbor. Jeremiah carries forth a scriptural legacy focused on the needs of aliens who lived in their midst because the immigration policy allowed them to be among the most vulnerable to be exploited. He focused on widows and orphans as those who in that context had great difficulty having their basic needs of food, shelter and healthcare met. Those who have those unmet needs today, whatever the cause, would seem to be those toward whom Jeremiah directs us.

A commitment to just and right relationships was the passion that ruled his life, with the understanding that such a commitment would lead to a true commonwealth. He lifted up good King Josiah as a role model who took up the cause of the poor and needy as an example of living out one's knowledge of the concerns of the Lord. Jeremiah pointed out that Josiah understood that he didn't need a lot of luxury. He simply focused on the basics: addressing his own basic needs while doing justice and living righteously – not a bad focus for a person in power or for a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We could live, seemingly contented in a society of vast inequality, but Jeremiah and Jesus point us toward a broad wellness, a commonwellth for ourselves and everyone else. We move toward a true commonwellth through just and right relationships guided by God's reign. We move in that direction by taking special interest in those who are having a difficult time finding safe harbor and saying to them, "My friends! Tell me! Do tell! Are you safe? Are you sound? Are you whole? Are you well?" That's the way toward God's desired state of commonwellth. Amen.

¹ Theodor Seuss Geisel, Horton Hears a Who!, Random House, 1954.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commonwealth>

³ From a story told by Eileen Lindner in a sermon at a Children's Defense Fund conference.