

4th Sunday after Epiphany
Jeremiah 1:4-10
January 30&31, 2010
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You know, there is just something about the way some people become attached to old buildings. I worked in the construction industry for seven years, and I saw this on more than one occasion. People become attached to old buildings, because they are beautiful, they hold memories, they have historical value. Take for example the old Lake Junior High School building, a building where I went to school for two years, a building that 10 years ago someone decided should be knocked down. Sometimes we have to let go of old buildings. Sometimes old buildings have to be knocked down to make way for something new.

The old Lake Junior High building was built in 1921, and was at one time the main school building in the district. Over the years the building's condition had begun to deteriorate and the school district did not have enough money to keep up with the increasing maintenance costs. Drafty windows, a leaky roof, crumbling masonry (bricks were literally falling off), and a temperamental heating system did not make an ideal learning environment. Of course, the construction of a new building also required money, and surprisingly voters passed a bond issue on the first try. But, passage of that levy meant demolishing the old building, a prospect that aroused strong feelings.

Before and after the passage of the levy, some in the community wondered why the old building could not be saved. For many, the old school building held fond memories of years past. The building was a community landmark, with a lot of history, and its demolition was not taken lightly. At times I felt caught in the middle. I went to school there for two years, and I had memories of the building. I also appreciated the historical significance of the building. I knew people who were opposed to demolishing the building, and people who supported it so that a new building could go up. But, I also worked for the company that would serve as construction

manager for the project. As an assistant cost estimator who was helping to develop budgets for the project, I knew the costs to save this 80 year old building were astronomical. The building had not been well-maintained for a long time, and now it was just too far gone. But there were *still* people who just could not see that this building had to be knocked down.

We human beings are good at hanging on to the old. We grow attached to old buildings, old cars, old books, old clothes, and old records (yes I know what those are). But we also grow attached to old ways of doing things, and old ways of thinking. Sometimes we aren't even aware of how attached we are to those ways until someone comes along and points them out, waking us up to something that needs to change. Even when the windows are drafty, the roof is leaking, and the bricks are crumbling, we might not be able to see that the old has to be knocked down so that something new can be built in its place. *This* is the role of the prophet, to point out the old buildings that have to be knocked down. It is the role to which God calls Jeremiah in today's first reading.

Jeremiah's call story is quite fascinating. God had plans for Jeremiah, even before he was in his mother's womb! Jeremiah objects to the call, as do most prophets, saying "I am only a boy" perhaps meaning that he feels is too young, or inexperienced for the call. But as is often the case with God, the reply is "not a problem". God promises to give Jeremiah the words to say, going so far as to *touch his mouth*. But it is the job that God has in mind for Jeremiah that is significant. Jeremiah has been "appointed over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah's call is huge in scope—to go to nations and kingdoms—and huge in purpose—to destroy and to build.

This call story sets the tone for the entire book of Jeremiah, as the book is filled with both words of destruction and words of rebuilding. Jeremiah speaks of disaster for Israel and Judah because of their disobedience. But he also speaks words of promise for a coming restoration.

The old ways must be destroyed to make way for something new. This is the role of the prophet, to call out what must be destroyed so that something new can replace it.

I've been thinking this past week about what a modern day Jeremiah might be like. I thought of attorney Mark Fancher, the keynote speaker at the Martin Luther King Jr. Unity Breakfast here in Muskegon two weeks ago. According to the newspaper, Mr. Fancher's comments were not what people were expecting. In fact, some were so upset by his comments that they *walked out of the room*. Why? Because he talked about racism, and "white privilege." The term "white privilege" refers to the reality of white people having an advantage over people of color, simply because of the color of their skin. It is a reality that has existed for a long time, and still exists, even though it is subtle at times. There are still very real disparities between whites and people of color. These disparities exist in jobs, education, housing, and quality of life. The term "white privilege" names this reality, and it sounds like that is what made people in the room upset. Often when white people hear this for the first time, or even after a few times, it is upsetting, even offensive.

Two years ago, I did not think racism was much of a problem anymore. But then I participated in a three-week seminary course that examined racism. It was a course that included a 10-day stay in inner city Detroit. Like some of the people attending the Unity Breakfast I believed that much progress had been made to eliminate racism. I was wrong.

The truth that confronted me was painful, as I heard about "white privilege" for the first time. I felt angry, confused, sad, and frustrated, sometimes all at the same time. I was confronted by the prophetic voices of a variety of people—clergy, elected officials, social workers, police officers—who related firsthand how the realities of racism affect their lives and the lives of people in Detroit. The statistics were staggering: in everything from crime, health, education, and earnings, I realized that I had an advantage over people just because of the color

of my skin. For 30 years I enjoyed more opportunities just because I am white. And that wasn't all. We talked about other "isms":

Such as sexism – not only am I white, but I'm a white *male*

And classism – not only am I a white male, but I am a white *middle class* male

And even ageism – not only am I a white male, but I am a white middle class male who at the time had recently turned 30.

And all that puts me at an advantage, not because of anything I've done, but because I possess certain characteristics that have long been viewed as desirable. Even our current economic crisis, which seems to have affected nearly everyone, has had a disproportionately worse affect on people of color. The reality is that much of our lives are affected by skin color, gender, age, and where we live. But it is a reality that is *not* what God intends. And like the prophet Jeremiah, we are called to speak up and call it what it is, and knock it down.

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Mr. Fancher was trying to knock down old buildings, old ways that just do not work anymore. On one hand, he was knocking down the illusion that everything is OK, that racism is no longer a problem. On the other hand he was knocking down racism itself. Racism is an old building that is no longer useful, *and really never was*, and it needs to be knocked down. The roof is leaking, the floors are buckling, the walls are caving in. *It must be knocked down!*

But we are called to do more than just knock down old buildings. The old Lake Junior High building was knocked down, but a new building was built. It was a *better* building, with windows that were weather tight, a roof that didn't leak, and good solid brick walls. God called Jeremiah to build and to plant. God gave Jeremiah words of hope and restoration for the exiles in Babylon. Something better was coming, not just new cities, but a new covenant, a new way of life.

So what new thing is God calling us to build in place of the old ways of racism, sexism, classism, and ageism?

Perhaps humility would be a good place to start, to acknowledge the problem that exists.

Perhaps patience, because these are problems that are deeply rooted, problems that take time to overcome.

Or maybe kindness, because no one should be boastful, arrogant, or rude.

It's starting to sound a lot like *love*, isn't it? It sounds like love as Paul describes it in our second reading. God calls us to build something new: to love. God calls us to speak out because the old way is not working, it never has. God calls us to speak about a better way, the way of love. We can trust that God will give us words to destroy the old ways to make way for the new way of love. But this new way of love is about more than words. It is about a new way of thinking, and a new way of *living*.

God calls us to be patient with others, and not just with people who are like me.

God calls us to be kind, and not just toward people who are like me.

God calls us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things with *all* people, and not just people who are like me.

God calls us to a love that never ends, regardless of your skin color, gender, age, or class.

God calls us to love, even if we do not feel up to the task. Let's face it, the call to love is not easy. Jeremiah's call was not easy, but God told Jeremiah that he would be with him. The call to love is not easy, but we can be assured that God will be with us.

The call to love is not easy. Just ask Sallie Sanders, whose family was forced out of her home in Hamtramck, Michigan over 40 years ago, just because they were black. Two weeks ago, she moved into a new home in Hamtramck, as part of the settlement of a housing discrimination case. These things take time to overcome, and the only way they can *really* be

overcome is by love, by getting over ourselves, looking out for the needs and interests of others, and living out a new reality in which color of skin, gender, age, or class no longer make a difference. Is this easy? No, but God shows us the way. The old must be knocked down in order for something new to be built. It takes time to knock down old buildings, but it takes even longer to build new ones. So it is with love. It takes time for love to overcome the old ways. But *one day* we will experience love in all its fullness.

Amen