

What do you do when you're in a nation that is rejecting the Lord and His word? What do you do when the land is full of people who claim to believe in God, but whose words and actions run contrary to His Commandments? What do you do as someone who possesses the truth, but lives in a world in which the very idea of absolute truth is mocked and despised? This is the context in which the prophet Jeremiah lived, the people to whom he was called to prophesy by the Lord. And it's our context as well.

So what do you do? Well, you call people to repentance, to turn away from sin and evil and toward God and His truth and love. That's what the Lord called Jeremiah to do. That's what all the prophets did. That's what Jesus did.

Calling to repentance is one of the tasks given to the Church by the Lord Himself. As we see in our reading from Jeremiah, calling to repentance isn't a particularly enjoyable task from a worldly perspective. But it is absolutely necessary. And so, out of faith in our God and love for our neighbor, we call.

Jeremiah's example shows us three things about calling to repentance. The first is that calling to repentance means speaking the fullness of God's word. The Lord tells Jeremiah, "Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word."

God has given us His word, the Holy Bible. The Holy Spirit inspired the prophets, evangelists, and apostles, giving them the very words to write. The Spirit has also preserved the word, safeguarding it against countless efforts to destroy it through the ages. And now, by His grace, we in our day have had it handed down to us. Its pages contain the holiness of God, the purpose of man, the reason for death, and the hope of life. In it is the Gospel, the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. But it must be read, preached, taught in its fullness.

In a hostile setting, we might be tempted to try to pick and choose parts of the word to speak and others to purposefully omit. We'd do this with good intentions, thinking that we could make the message of Scripture more appealing, more desirable for the world.

Yet the Bible is not a buffet, where you can take the parts you like and leave those you don't. If and when we should try to do this, we end up putting our reason above the perfect knowledge and wisdom of God Himself. He has given us His word in its entirety, and has done so according to His good and gracious will.

God tells Jeremiah to preach everything that He gives to Him, to hold nothing back. The Lord says that it must be the whole word, not just the pleasant-sounding parts, in order for the people to listen and possibly turn from their evil ways. If Jeremiah doesn't confront the sins of the people, which would certainly be the parts of the word he would like to omit, then they'll be hardened, confirmed in the sins which are bringing down the Lord's judgment.

Jeremiah must preach the entire word given to him, both the stern warnings of God's impending wrath and the gracious promises of forgiveness and blessing which God offers.

This is not unique to Jeremiah, either, or even just some "Old Testament" thing that went away with the coming of Jesus. Christ Himself, speaking to His disciples after His resurrection, declares that they are to proclaim both repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations. The Apostle Paul would write to the young pastor, Timothy, reminding him that the word was to be used both for teaching and for rebuke, both for training in righteousness and correction of error.

In some of the very last verses in the Bible, toward the very end of the last chapter of Revelation, the Apostle John tells the Church, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

This is why pastors in our church, myself included, solemnly swear to God and to you all at our ordinations that we accept the entirety of Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, as from the Holy Spirit and completely true, and that all our teaching, preaching, and practice will be in conformity to these inerrant, infallible, and divinely-unified Scriptures. Like the prophets and apostles who came before, pastors and all Christians are called to speak the truth, for our God and His word are the truth.

As we speak this whole truth, including the call to repent of sin, the word makes clear a second thing that will occur. People will not like it. No one ever enjoys or looks forward to being called to repentance.

Jeremiah knew this all too well. What sort of response does he get from proclaiming the word given to him by the Lord? We read, "And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die!'" This isn't just a cold shoulder, or shouts and cursing. In response to hearing the call – from the Lord – to repent, the people form a lynch mob and seek to put Jeremiah to death. At other times in Jeremiah's ministry, he is beaten, put in stocks, tossed into a pit, and even kidnapped.

And again, this extremely hostile response is not unique to Jeremiah. Many of his fellow prophets were abused and even killed in response to their divinely-given calls of repentance. John the Baptist was beheaded after calling King Herod to repentance. Jesus earned the ire of the Sanhedrin, which finally led to them condemning Him to death, in part because He pointed out their sins and called on them to repent. And those who follow in Jesus' footsteps and speak His words as His disciples? Jesus says, "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household."

So we must not see hostility, the fact that people get offended at God's word, as a sign that we're doing something wrong. Now, we shouldn't try to be inordinately offensive in the way we call people to repent. But again, the call to repent will be offensive.

Why is that? Well, the call to repent is one that exposes people's idols. It entails showing that a person has elevated something above God and His Word, that they are believing that what they are doing will be better for them, bring them more good, than to do what God has said.

This is all compounded by the fact that an idol always starts off as something given by God, and so our sinful flesh will want to justify the idolatry by pointing out that whatever it is came from God. In Jeremiah's day, it was the city of Jerusalem and especially the temple, which God had blessed and even dwelt in, but which the people were trusting in rather than God Himself. That's why they become enraged when Jeremiah says that the Lord is going to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

In our day, these idols can take many forms. "God has given us such beauty in nature. What could be wrong about being out and enjoying it rather than hearing God's word." "God has given us such great knowledge through scientific pursuits. Surely what it uncovers must be true, even if it seems to contradict the Bible." "God has given us our government. We clearly need to obey it in all things, even where it goes against the word." "God has given me my reason and all my senses. Surely they wouldn't lead me astray." "God has given me my friends and family members. He wouldn't want me to do anything that might drive them away." Idolatry is such a danger, because the thing that is made into an idol very often starts off as a good thing given by God.

Calling to repentance also upsets people because it goes against that sin that's at the root of so many other sins – the sin of pride. Pride tells us that we know what's right, we know what's best, we know what we can do. Repentance calls us to confess that we don't always know what's right, that we don't always know what's best, that we can't always do what we want.

And pride takes another blow when it comes out that there is one who does know what's right, what's best, what we can and cannot do. Pride absolutely resents being wrong, and when confronted, it responds with hostility and anger. How dare Jeremiah tell the priests and prophets they're wrong – who is he to question them? How dare Jesus tell the people in our Gospel reading that to oppose Him is to join with the demons? How dare someone tell me – a good person – that what I'm doing goes against God's word?

Pride is rooted in the heart of every person as part of his sinful nature, and only by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit can such pride be crushed and humility and repentance be brought forth.

This working of the Holy Spirit is connected to the third thing we learn from Jeremiah about repentance, namely, that the reason we call people to repentance is because repentance is necessary for salvation.

The Lord tells Jeremiah that, unless the people repent, He will bring His wrath and judgment down on them. It isn't as though the future is up in the air, uncertain, and repentance will improve their odds but maybe they'll be fine if they keep on doing what they're doing. No, the Lord says through Jeremiah that, if the people do not turn from their evil, He will bring disaster upon them. And He also says that, if they do repent, mending their ways and their deeds and obeying the voice of the Lord their God, He will – not might, will – relent of the disaster of which He has spoken. There is no middle ground – either repent and live, or harden and die.

This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. In the confession we spoke this morning, we confessed the words found in First John 1: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” To deny the existence of our sins – our need to repent – is to deny the truth, and thereby to deny the God who is truth. But to confess our sins is to confess the faithfulness, the righteousness, and the love of God to wipe away our sins and restore us to Himself.

To refuse God’s call to repent and despise His discipline is to be Pharaoh, hardening oneself to one’s own destruction. To hear God’s call, and turn from wickedness when He disciplines us is to be one of the Egyptians who came to acknowledge the Lord as the true God, and in leaving Egypt were joined to the chosen people of God.

To refuse to turn from our sins is to be the unrepentant thief on the cross, mocking the Lord even as He pours out His blood for us. To humble ourselves and throw ourselves upon the mercy of God is to be the repentant thief, possessing God-given faith to acknowledge Jesus as the Lamb of God and to hear and believe His words that, when we die, we will be with Him in paradise. There is no middle ground.

Our Lord tells us in His word that He desires all to be saved. He doesn’t enjoy or look forward to bringing His judgment on any person. He declares through His prophet Ezekiel, “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live.”

Even when people rebel against Him and shove Him away, He longs in His heart for their return. One of the most tender passages showing this loving, fatherly heart of God comes from another prophet, Hosea. In the eleventh chapter, the Lord speaks of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and how they have utterly despised Him and worshiped false gods. Yet the Lord remembers them as His little child, whose arms He held and He taught them to walk, who healed them when they fell, who guided them with kindness and love.

Yet they have pushed and pushed and pushed, and have now forced God’s hand, that He must bring down His judgment. He knows the Assyrians will bring terrible devastation upon them, because they will not repent and turn from their idols and back to Him, and it grieves Him terribly. Yet even with their wickedness, still He loves them, still He has compassion for this wayward, rebellious child! And so, He says that He will come again and be in their midst, not in wrath, but as the Messiah.

When we the Church call on people to repent, we do it out of this same love. In love, we speak the truth about sin, that sin is not just a little thing, but an affront to the Most High God, and that to despise God’s word is to despise God Himself. In love, we neither excuse nor justify sin, because to do so is to harden a person in their sin and set a stumbling block between them and the Lord who calls to them. In love, we bear with the anger that will be directed at us, not returning it, but turning the other cheek.

When we speak God’s word, calling to repentance, we trust that it is God who will work to bring the person back to the truth. It is not our reasoning, our persuasiveness, our charm, that will do it.

The Lord may make use of such talents, but the power to shatter hearts of stone and grant new hearts that love and trust in Him belongs to Him and Him alone.

And as we call to repentance, we continually look inward, asking the Lord to reveal our transgressions to us, that we might confess them and receive His abundant mercy and cleansing. We pray those words of Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,” so that, as the Psalm continues, “Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You.”

Jeremiah was given the word of repentance to speak to the people of Judah. And He was also given a great love for them, even as they abused him and rejected his calling.

The Lord has given us His word to speak – the Bible – and we are to hold to all of it. The Lord has told us that calling to repentance will often cause offense, even anger. And yet the Lord has given us to do this because He loves the sinner and desires us, His Church, to be His voice, calling out that people might turn from idols and live.

In the holy name of Jesus, amen.