

Elliott Munn

8/18/19

Text: Jeremiah 23:23-29

If I Had a Hammer

I want to tell you about a special church meeting. Nine of us gathered at Bob Sitkowski's house on Walbridge Road, and we began a few minutes after our official starting time. All settled in cozy chairs, facing one another in a circle, then each of us took turns letting our anger fly.

Rather than a committee meeting, this was an organizing meeting. If the goal is to affect wider societal change, organizing experts say you need to begin at the personal level. They want you to build relationships and learn one another's stories in order to find common cause. They ask simple questions such as, "What do you feel needs to be changed?" or "What keeps you up at night?" Then, they encourage us to make it personal.

Folks in the room came ready to share. The anger in the room was not the kind of anger that burns bright and fast like kindlin but rather the kind the burns steady and hot. Yes, there was outrage that trickles in daily from our media outlets of choice, but that mostly took a back seat. These were personal stories of anger. Ones that we carry with us, guiding our sense of what is right and wrong from one moment to the next.

When it was my turn, I leaned on a story that I have been carrying for a while. My mother, who has primary-progressive multiple sclerosis, came to visit me for the first time in her wheelchair this past Christmas Eve. Before the nine o' clock service, we went out to dinner here in West Hartford Center. We made our reservation well in advance, and we entered the restaurant through the backdoor. The ramp was a bit slick and the door was sticky, but we were grateful to find a place to eat together.

After a delicious meal, my father helped my mother to the restroom. A short line was forming outside the door, and cued-up women shot dagger glances at my father when he opened the door. To their credit, their faces revealed at least some sympathy as my mother trailed behind. As we left the restaurant, one man seemed particularly peeved that we were trying to open the stuck door next to his table. "Can't you just go out the front door," he snarled. My father quipped back, "My wife's in a wheelchair, buddy. There are steps that way." Unmoved, the gentleman fumed until we finally made our way out. "Merry Christmas," I chimed as I shut the door behind me. Merry Christmas, indeed.

Whenever I recall that story, the anger of the moment comes back. I can usually let go of personal slights or moments of carelessness, but what makes that memory hurt so much are the broader societal attitudes each one of those details represents. I get angry with myself that it took my mother shifting to a wheelchair to begin to see the depth of our cultural sickness regarding accessibility.

The prophets of the Bible were known to get a little hot under the collar, too, and Jeremiah's anger is as ferocious you will find. He is prophesying in the southern kingdom of Judah around the time it falls to the Babylonians in the early 6th century BCE. He believes ardently that the decline of Judah comes from their idolatry, their failure to get their priorities straight. According to Jeremiah, to put God truly first in one's life leads to treating the disadvantaged justly. In the chapter before our reading today, he says, "Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place." Unfortunately, Judah fails to live up to these expectations. For Jeremiah, the fall of Judah is not just a failure of geopolitical strategy. It is more importantly a moral failure that incurs God's wrath.

In today's scripture, he is lambasting the other prophets who claim to speak for God yet are only interested in making their listeners feel better. While claiming God speaks to them in a dream, they speak of God that is lukewarm, small, and manipulatable. Jeremiah asks, "Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God near off." The answer, of course is both. For Jeremiah, God is intimate enough to know their suffering, and yet also transcendent, that is big, elevated, beyond us enough to see the larger picture, too. What God finds in Judah is deeply troubling.

In the midst of a time that feels worse than ever, how can they trust that the words they hear from their prophets are indeed from God? How do you sort out the wheat from the straw? According to Jeremiah, words that truly come from God are like fire or a hammer that smashes rocks. God's word is provocative and dangerous. After all, when you play with fire, there is a chance you get burned. And, if you wield a hammer, there's a chance you break off more than you bargained for.

As I sat in the circle at Bob's house, the angry stories kept coming. There was a long pause between each one. We wanted to honor the stories without rushing in to fix whatever they were feeling—the stories cut too deep for platitudes. When we finished going around the circle, it was hard to know what to do with that moment. We had a sense that we were handling some powerful. The words felt hot as fire and strong enough to crush rocks. Amidst the feeling of helplessness, who knew that God had given each of us a hammer?

Learning to use a hammer, of course, can be treacherous. At first, you do your best to square up a nail only to bend it, mark up the wood, or give your thumb a good rapping. None of us in the room were organizing experts that night. Although each of us felt the power in the room, we did not know exactly how to move forward with what we heard. We saw some common threads and sent some notes to the lead organizer, who interprets the notes from all of the house meetings from congregations in Greater Hartford.

Although we did not generate a list of action items, we did create a space together for our passion to flourish. Anger can be a holy gift albeit a heavy one. Holy anger is a sign that the Spirit of God is moving inside of us, and we are present to the suffering of the world. It is a sign we are alive and awake. God is opening our hearts to the imminent needs of those around us and the larger vision of the kin-dom. Holding both of those at once is too much to bear alone. Even if we

were not ready to start swinging hammers, we were able to help one another shoulder their weight.

While it all sounds rather earnest, there was also some sweetness to the evening. Lauren Dube, our Director of Children and Family Ministries and veteran organizer, made strawberry shortcake, and we made sure never to take ourselves too seriously. Figuring something out that is both as simple and complicated all at once as organizing can lead to rather playful moments. Someone might ask, "Well, how did that encounter with that insensitive man make you feel?" And, another responds, "Who are you my therapist? How do you think it felt?"

Thankfully, the Good News of the Gospel is more than carrying burdens or even carrying burdens together. The Good News is that God freely invites us to journey together and wonderful things flourish from that relationship: justice, joy, and peace, both within us and beyond us.

In chapter 22 Jeremiah writes, "If you will indeed obey this word, then though the gates of this house shall enter the royalty who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people." As a Christian, I cannot help but hear this and think of Matthew 25: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." By giving of ourselves in acts of justice, we discover Jesus by our side and joyous community beginning to take shape.

So, if you had a hammer, what would you do? Is there a problem in the world you would squash? Would you bang your thumb? Would you build up community? Fortunately, each of us does have a hammer through the power of God. Use it well.

© 2019 Elliott Munn all rights reserved

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107