
Homily/Sermon Seeds

– Jeremiah 15: The Suffering Servant –



National Farm Worker Ministry Resources

Instructions:

Read and re-work this analytical exegesis of Jeremiah 15:10-21 to fit your congregation or group context. It was chosen so that a pastor, who is likely adept in preaching, could re-work the text into their congregation. The sufferings of Jeremiah on behalf of his community have some clear overlaps to the farm worker movement – those who speak up often find themselves suffering with the weight of injustice and frustration. Again, the sermon/homily should be adapted to your congregation's context, particularly if they have a history of participating in the farm worker advocacy/solidarity movement. Also note that subheadings are available to help the one speaking know where the exegesis is headed. If you need more sources about farm workers, please visit www.nfwm.org.

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Introduction

Viewing and treating Jeremiah 15:10-21 as an emotional catharsis or as a secret, diary-like interlude limit the insatiable wealth of Jeremiah's lament. Though the text may feel like a diary or "confessional sequence" of lament (Holladay 1986, 449), the moans of the prophet suggest that there is a larger problem at stake for himself and for Judah. And today, we find that his groanings and embodied pain are in solidarity with farm workers – migrant, mostly Mexican, laborers who pick, grow, and harvest our crops.

Jeremiah's Narrative Context

Jeremiah's context illumines why he becomes the embodiment of suffering in 15:10-21. His suffering precedes the actual assault on Jerusalem. The prophet and his scribe Baruch, note they were writing "throughout the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleven year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month" (1:3 JSB). The book's introduction foreshadows the impending destruction (which is reported in 34:1-5). Historically, Jerusalem was a "vassal state of Babylon," which "allowed the Babylonians to extort high taxes from Judah, to place a puppet king on the throne, and to interfere in internal affairs" (O'Connor 2012, 268). The first twenty-five chapters of Jeremiah cover his premonitions of the coming Babylonian military invasions (in 597, 587 and 582 CE). Along with his warnings, Jeremiah is speaking condemning oracles that calling for Judah and Jerusalem's repentance. As I will continue to illustrate, his unwelcome messages of despair, rape, and death to Judah ultimately lead the prophet to experience physical pain – a sign in itself of the coming sufferings of Judahites.

Suffering Inflicted by His Enemies

Throughout the whole book, Jeremiah's prophetic ministry earned him numerous enemies who sought to make him suffer. He laments the many people trying to kill him. His anger can be heard in 15:15, when Jeremiah laments, "Bring down retribution for me on my persecutors" (15:15 NRSV). Specifically, he finds himself making enemies with the general population and several Judahite leaders. First, Jeremiah's prophetic words stir and anger general Judahites whom he prophesies against (15:10). John Bright translates 15:10 to state, "Ah me, my mother, that you bore me / *To accuse and indict the whole land!* / ... Yet all of them curse me" [emphasis mine] (1965, 106). Then, Bright notes the italicized phrase "Literally means, 'a man of legal strife (rib) and legal contention (madon: the root denotes a process at law) to the whole land.' [Thus,] Jeremiah is like one who is perpetually at law with his people" (Bright 1965, 109). Eleven chapters later, the whole population become the subject of his bickering and "law" (26:1-11). Under the priests and prophets of Judah, his Judahite enemies get close to actually sentencing him to death. Therefore, the Jeremiah's lament encapsulates his painful suffering and the strength of the wicked persons' grasp (15:21).

Secondly, the Judahite leaders inflict Jeremiah's pain. Technically, the exact persons are not named in the fifteenth chapter, but it is plausible to trace the prophet's oppressors to the Judahite leadership because three of its members specifically seek his demise. His lament captures the pains of those leaders who abuse him elsewhere in the book. Passhur the priest beats him and puts him in the stocks (20:1-6). The competing prophet, Hananiah, ruins his sign act, e.g. he wears a yolk symbolic of Babylonian oppression (28:1-7). The king of Judah also burns Jeremiah's scroll and arrests him (36:26-27). All three of them shame Jeremiah. His enemies in power may have even stripped him of his prophetic status, which YHWH restores in 15:19. Bickering with and challenging the powerful persons in Judahite society does Jeremiah personal harm. Abraham Heschel, one of the Jewish Rabbis involved with the Civil Rights Movement

once crafted a helpful description of a generalized prophetic person, who based on the prophets revealed throughout the Old Testament. He finds Jeremiah's example in 15:15 to be exemplary of social suffering. He notes, "The mission he [the generalized prophet, as illustrated by Jeremiah] performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness. The prophet bears scorn and reproach (Jer. 15:15)" (Heschel 1962, 18). Modern prophets are treated similarly. People like Cesar Chavez or union leaders in the farm worker movement, leaders are seen as threats. Those who speak prophetically on behalf of the marginalized are likely to feel the pain of others. Just like farm workers are hurt and sometimes killed in the fields they work due to machinery accidents, pesticide poisoning, etc., their leaders often face trials and pains. In other words, Jeremiah is ostracized for challenging Judah's powerful religious and political leaders.

Suffering Through Loneliness

Jeremiah is made to suffer alone. His separation is not expected like that of a monk or hermit. Instead, Jeremiah's call to prophetic ministry created separation from God and others, and was later amplified when YHWH requires him to remain celibate. Surprisingly, the prophet feels estranged from his deity. In the CEB and NIV translations, Jeremiah asks God to "remember" him (15:15). The NRSV's interpretation makes his spiritual isolation clearer as Jeremiah states, "O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me" (15:15). He seems confused that the same God who "called" him has also left him alone (15:16, NRSV). Playing off of the drought imagery in chapter 14, he calls God a "deceitful brook" (15:18 NRSV) and "waters that cannot be relied on" (15:18 JSB). Jeremiah's painful drought is a social one. Jeremiah's cry of abandonment sounds like an echo from Israel's wanderings in the Wilderness (Numbers 20:3-5; 21:5); his wished he was still in his Egypt, e.g. unborn (Jer. 15:15; 20:3-6). Moreover, in verses 17-18, Jeremiah notes how he "sat alone" at "festive occasions" (15:17 CEB) because he was painfully following God's call (15:18). Ironically, Jeremiah is able to experience great loneliness while being with "the company of merrymakers" (15:17 NRSV). He feels alien to his own people. This feeling likely prompts Jeremiah's harsh critique of YHWH.

Jeremiah's lonely suffering is amplified in the following chapter, when God commands him to remain celibate (16:1-5). Jeremiah is therefore barred from the social experiences of marriage, copulation, and fatherhood. Put another way, YHWH's marriage ban forces the prophet's loneliness to persist. Thus, Jeremiah embodies Judah's future suffering by loneliness. After Babylon enters the Judah, many will be killed or raped (5:14-17; 6:12, 22-25; 9:10-11, 16-21; 13:22, 26-27). Like the prophet, Judah's inhabitants will be estranged from their land, family, and peers.

It seems as though Jeremiah's suffering can feel like ours. As individuals who personally support farm worker advocacy programs, or do anything we can to help, we can feel lonely in our cause. The world's industries always have a leg up. Injustice abounds. And few of our peers not already involved want to hear.

Jeremiah's Solidarity with Suffering Women

Jeremiah's emotional words are quite strong as they evoke great pain. One can imagine him screaming them: "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me" (15:10 NRSV). They set the tone for realizing that his indignation comes from his vocational questioning and his solidarity with suffering women. By referencing his vocational origin story from 1:9-14, Jeremiah highlights that God created him to suffer (15:10). His vocational work is not appreciated or understood. Though Jeremiah certainly can see that he is fulfilling YHWH's call

to uproot, tear down, and build up Judahite society (1:10), he views it as being cursed. Like the undeserving, righteous sufferer Job, Jeremiah has not sinned or earned the afflictions he has, which are attributed to YHWH (Job 1:21; 3:1-20). Interestingly, both Job and Jeremiah spurn their births – the gateways to their callings *and* sufferings. A few chapters later, Jeremiah laments again, cursing his parents and his day of birth (20:14-16).

Arguably, by cursing his body's entrance in the world (his birth), he associates his suffering with women's pains. Earlier, Jeremiah proclaims "Pain seizes us [Judah], / Agony like a woman in childbirth" (6:24). O'Connor suggests:

Women in childbirth appear frequently in Jeremiah (4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 20:14-18; 22:23; 30:6; 48:41; 49:24; 50:43). ... It may reveal that childbirth created such fear among men that it could serve aptly as a symbol of the nation's approaching calamity. ... Jeremiah appropriates women's unique contribution to life and applies it to men [like himself] as a metaphor of death (2012, 273).

Therefore, Jeremiah personally identifies with the gender-based violence that Babylon will soon cause. Since women will be likely raped in the destruction of Jerusalem, childbirth could be an estrangement of kinship and a degradation of the female body. Throughout the entirety of Jeremiah's writings, women were victims of suffering, abuse, and rape (O'Connor 2012, 269, 273-277). Likewise, the prophet finds that the cries of women best encapsulate the horrors of war and violence. Their words are insights to his personal pain, as well as Judah's foul fate. Two chapters before his lament, Jeremiah proclaims the chaos and rape of his people. Specifically, as instructed by YHWH, the prophet utilizes violent and pornographic language in 13:22, 26-27, in order to describe the destruction of Judah. Rape, it seems, is the most fitting way to describe the pain of the Babylonian invasion and the Exile. Right before his own lament begins in 15:10, YHWH describes a mother of seven who will be "shamed and humiliated" before she will die in the Babylonian assault or Exile (15:9 JSB). By lamenting his own birth and his self-association with feminine suffering, Jeremiah embodies the coming suffering of Judah.

Jeremiah's Embodiment of Suffering

Eventually, the trauma of prophetic work eventually finds its host: Jeremiah's physical body. The tip off to his experience with pain is signaled first in a joyful act. Just as his contemporary Ezekiel "ate" the living words of YHWH in (Ezekiel 2:8-3:3), Jeremiah claims to do the same in (Jeremiah 1:9, 15:16). William L. Holladay adds, "the phrase [in 1:9] then refers to Jrm's [Jeremiah's] acceptance of his call – he made them part of himself" (1986, 458). In claiming that he "ate" the word of the Lord, Jeremiah's physical body becomes the place of God's activity.

Simultaneously, it also becomes the actual site of suffering. His body suffers as soon as he is born (15:10). He cannot separate his ministerial vocation and his body, for it is intrinsically affected by his ministerial work. Through childbirth Jeremiah opens his body to be susceptible to the pains he faces in making enemies and loneliness. Despite the fact that these concepts are non-physical subjects, they still have a powerful influence on human beings. For example, Jeremiah's 'social outcast' status and his arguments cause him to feel "cursed" (15:10). His body becomes the actualized site of stress and pain. The NRSV captures his anguish and pain in 15:18, for Jeremiah woefully laments:

Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? (NRSV).

His cries of ailment are grounded in immense discomfort. Jeremiah uses bodily words to assert a need for healing. Ellen Davis says, "As Jeremiah himself recognizes, he suffers precisely

because God relies on him (Jer. 15:15-17); for him as for Job, *suffering is both a mark and consequence of faithful service* (20:8-9)” (2014, 156, emphasis mine). Though Davis does not mean a physical mark, her words can add a helpful visual to my argument. Jeremiah is marked. He bears the bodily scars of divine service that Judahites ought to notice.

Therefore, the prophet’s body becomes the example of Judah’s future fall and captivity. Jeremiah’s pains are not purposeless divine torture. His body almost becomes its own sign act – a symbol of Judah’s coming troubles. Like his suffering, Jerusalem and Judah will soon experience the oncoming slaughter that Jeremiah prescribed earlier in 13:18-22. YHWH’s vision for destruction takes physical forms. First, Judah’s “wealth” will be stripped from its inhabitants (15:13, 19:4-5). Secondly, the land, e.g. “your territory,” will also be plundered (15:13 JSB). Lastly, the ‘burning anger’ of YHWH – a common image in Jeremiah 18-22’s descriptions of judgment – will cause Judahites “to serve your [their] enemies in a land that you do not know” (15:14 NRSV). The JSB intensifies the description in 15:14, stating that the flares of God’s wrath “blaze against” Judah. This echoes the burning imagery in 5:14 JSB: “I am putting My words into your [Jeremiah’s] mouth as fire, / This people shall be firewood, / Which it will consume.” Therefore, YHWH’s judgment of Judah will create numerous discomforts and pains. Like the prophet, Judah will soon suffer greatly.

The Listening God

Fortunately for Jeremiah, the text does not only reveal his personal suffering and the oncoming destruction of Judah. Instead of ending with personal lament, the voice of YHWH in 15:10-21 offers dialogue. God hears the cries of Jeremiah in 15:10, 15-18, and responds directly to Jeremiah’s list of grievances. Before Jeremiah 15:10-21, the preceding nine verses describe YHWH’s description of Judah’s coming fall and exile (15:1-9). Thus, when Jeremiah begins his dialogue with God in verse 10, he cries out in anger! The prophet names his enemies (15:10, 15), his loneliness (15:17), and YHWH’s failure (15:18) as the wrongs placed upon him. Meanwhile, YHWH simply listens. The evidence of God’s hearing appears within YHWH’s considerate and direct responses. To Jeremiah’s claim of having enemies, the Lord says that no enemies have been “imposed” upon the prophet (15:11) and that ultimately “I am with you / To save you and deliver you” (15:20). Later, the Lord agrees to take Jeremiah back, to restore him as the prophetic “spokesperson” (15:19 JSB). In Jeremiah 15:19 JSB, God claims, “If you turn back, I shall take you back.” In other words, YHWH offers a claim of restoration. God is restoring Jeremiah to God’s self – it is a healing moment and also a solution to loneliness. Likewise, God dialogues with Jeremiah to promise restoration. As it stated in 15:11, a “remnant” will remain and Jeremiah will be protected from “the clutches of the violent” (15:21). That is to say, Jeremiah will be saved from the Judahites and they will be rescued from the Babylonians.

The Restorative God

After responding to his grievances, God technically does not offer any new word. It is as though God’s motto is “Stay the course.” Jeremiah’s words seem to hope that YHWH will suddenly entirely change its mind as God did for Moses in Exodus (e.g. God “relented” in Exodus 32:14 NRSV). Sadly, the coming disaster resembles the depressing answer to Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah’s razing in Genesis 18:17-33: God does not change its mind. People will soon suffer. The obvious objection is that there is a complete reversal for YHWH to announce suffering (15:1-19) and to then promise that it will take its people back (15:19). However, YHWH returns to the plans announced in the first chapter. It seems as though Jeremiah’s voice is clearly ignorant of God’s formerly pronounced vision.

According to YHWH in 1:14-16, the northern invasion will come to punish the wicked, idolatrous Judahites, but that YHWH will also rescue its people. The original promise of rescue appears in the metaphor of a fortified bronze wall in 1:18 and 15:20. Thus, just as God promises to deliver Jeremiah from his enemies, or the “grasp of the violent” (15:21 CEB), the Judah will eventually be rescued. Slaughter and terror will still occur as outlined in 15:11-14, but God promises to “save you and deliver you” (15:20 NRSV). The “remnant” prescribed to be killed by Babylon’s invasion, the Exile, famines, or plagues 15:2 is actually allowed to survive in 15:11. No new word is given, but this is because God has been consistently displayed as a restorative deity in the book of Jeremiah. God’s listening leads God’s self to then remind its servant Jeremiah that rescue and restoration were always the main plans. The scarring of Jerusalem and Judah will happen, but so will God’s deliverance (15:20). God’s hand, a human and bodily image, is what will restore its prophet and its people (15:20-21).

Conclusion

For those of us who are involved with the farm worker movement, we often find ourselves trying to seek solidarity. Our pains certainly do not match those who work from dawn to a time way past dusk for little money. Yet we find ourselves at times, emotionally, financially, and sometimes spiritually in pain. We want to solve every boycott. We want to give more than we have to fund something. We want to speak truth, so that our peers at the grocery store or at a large corporation will finally hear and recant.

The images of Jeremiah’s suffering and YHWH’s listening, restorative care are gorgeously intertwined in 15:10-21. The suffering of Jeremiah, feeling embodied the pains of making enemies in prophetic ministry and loneliness, finds a voice in experiences of women coming to terms with the military assaults and the Exile. YHWH’s dialogue with the pain-ridden prophet reminds us dedicated to farm worker and justice movements of this: that physical suffering is often incurred within vocational work. By getting involved, we open our bodies to stress, fatigue, tears, and emotional scarring.

But, our stories and pains find similarity in the prophet’s dialogue in with YHWH. Their conversation suggests being God’s “spokesman” or “voice” invites personal suffering (15:19 JSB and NRSV respectively). Few social prophets go unmarked. Even fewer survive their prophetic ministry. In particular, Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister and leader of the Civil Rights movement, was stabbed and killed for his prophetic work. Arguably, his blood and body symbolized the pains of persons of color, for they have long suffered the beatings, isolation, segregation, and alienation that his body took. Likewise, Cesar Chavez, who did so much work to gain worker rights throughout his lifetime was beaten and hurt. He actually later developed paranoia because of his stress and pains. And yet, he knew that his body and his family would suffer. As we watched earlier, Chavez realized his body was bound to suffer for the farm worker’s cause. When violence grew, he fasted until the violence ended; and most memorably, his fast ended with the Eucharist. In the breaking of Christ’s body, his intentional suffering ended. But, over time, his commitment to Christ and his fellow farmworkers, he suffered greatly.

God’s calling to prophecy welcomes the embodied, personal afflictions of the prophet, which stand as the symbolic sufferings of their community. As we continue to proclaim the truth to join in solidarity with farm workers, both as a church and as individuals, we must consider how their bodies will bear the consequences and the marks of their prophetic speech. And we must participate in the suffering that our listening, restorative God hears and heals.

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