

The Four Great Friendships, Part 3: Friendship with Self

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Niantic Community Church
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Scripture: Genesis 1:26; Jeremiah 20:7-18

In my senior year of high school when I sensed a Call to ministry, I was pretty freaked out. Ministers were supposed to be moral and spiritual giants, who knew the scriptures like the back of their hands. They were supposed to be mature people, unfazed by worldly temptations, and who face life's challenges with the quiet confidence that Lord is their Shepherd.

This wasn't me.

So, for the next four years, I ran as hard as I could from my sense of Call, only giving up when I realized that there was no objection that the Spirit couldn't overcome.

Once I finally got to seminary, I discovered that the Bible is replete with examples of people who sense God calling them to do one thing or another and their first reaction is either to run away (Jonah), laugh at the ridiculousness of the idea (Sarah), or protest that they aren't up to the task (Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Peter).

I took special comfort from Jeremiah's protest that he was "only a boy" and wasn't nearly qualified enough to speak the "word of the Lord" to his community. Jeremiah felt the same way I did! I also took comfort in God's response to Jeremiah: "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom *I send* you, and you shall speak whatever *I command* you. Do not be afraid of them, for *I am with you to deliver you.*" (Jeremiah 1:4-8)

In other words, God assured Jeremiah that God would be helping him – directing who he should speak go to, what he should say. God even promised to protect Jeremiah when people inevitably resisted God's messages.

As it turned out, Jeremiah would need a lot of God's protection! So would I, for that matter. When I finally entered the ministry, I soon learned that you can't really follow God's Call very far, or for very long, without kicking up a little dust. Sometimes that "dust" becomes a sand storm. As they say, "no good deed goes unpunished."

Jeremiah certainly found this to be true when he accepted God's Call to deliver the "word of the Lord" to Jerusalem's religious and political leadership. The opposition he experienced in his time, and his response to it, offers us a great deal of insight into what to anticipate when we honestly seek to do "on earth as it is in heaven." Just as importantly, Jeremiah's story offers us insight into a God whose desire is that we do not just love God and our neighbor, but *ourselves* as well.

A little context is helpful.

Right around the time Jeremiah experienced his call to ministry, an old, forgotten scroll was discovered in the Jerusalem Temple that biblical scholars believe was the core of the book of Deuteronomy. In it, God promised Moses and the Israelites that they would receive blessing after blessing if they stayed true to the strict laws of the Covenant established at Mt. Sinai, and curse after curse if they did not.

This discovery came at a convenient time for King Josiah. It provided him with a religious mandate for undergoing a full-scale concentration of both political and religious power in Jerusalem. Remember that there was no clear line of separation between “church and state” in ancient Israel. Political and religious power were intertwined. The fact that there were so many places of worship throughout Israel meant that there were many centers of political power that were not necessarily in lock step with the Jerusalem leadership.

So, Josiah undertook a massive “reform” effort. In the name of ensuring that only the purest form of Israelite worship and righteous activity took place in Israel, Josiah and his officials systematically tore down Yahweh sanctuaries throughout Israel, requiring that all worship and take place in Jerusalem only.

Coincidentally, those early years of “reform” were also years of a little greater financial prosperity and political muscle with respect to Israel’s neighbors. While these blessings tended to benefit those who were already wealthy and powerful rather than those who were not, this co-incidence of religious reform and greater prosperity and power was seen to be a sign that the promises contained in the scroll were trustworthy. This provided justification for even greater “reforms” and stricture concentration of power in Jerusalem.

Yet, Jeremiah isn’t buying any of it. According to Jeremiah, the so-called “reforms” made by Josiah and his leadership are all superficial. Their intent was never to actually to do “on earth as it is in heaven,” but to benefit themselves only. Even if Israel was praying the “right” prayers, and singing the “right” songs in worship, none of this was having any actual effect on their actions. The rich were becoming richer. The powerful were becoming more powerful (at least in Jerusalem). And the poor were being exploited. The widow and the orphan were being neglected. The most vulnerable in society were becoming more and more vulnerable.

In response, God instructs Jeremiah to speak truth to power – to deliver message after message that none of the power structure of Jerusalem wanted to hear.

What made Jeremiah’s life and ministry particularly troublesome was the fact that the Jerusalem elite were plotting to leverage their increasing power to throw off the yoke of their Babylonian overlords and declare Israel to be a free and independent nation. Bear in mind that, nestled as Israel was between the two great superpowers of the time – Egypt and Babylonia – Israel had not been a free and independent nation since time of King David and Solomon, half a millennium earlier. And that freedom lasted for just 70 years. The idea that Israel could become a free and independent nation was a pipe dream – or would turn into a nightmare if they actually tried it.

To put what was happening in today's terms, this scenario would be like the State of Connecticut launching religious "reforms" by closing down all churches and city halls outside of Hartford, claiming God's authority for doing so. It would be like declaring that Connecticut was seceding from the United States, with God's blessing, and expecting that God would protect Hartford and the rest of Connecticut the wrath of the United States military once they realized we were serious about seceding.

Yet, becoming free and independent would be an amazing financial boon to the wealthiest in Israel, and give the Jerusalem elite unprecedented power, provided they could withstand the wrath of the Babylonians. Given that withstanding such force would clearly take a miracle of God, it was easy for Josiah and his leaders to become mesmerized by the fantasy that God was inspiring their vision in the first place.

Jeremiah was God's choice of messenger to pop the bubble on Josiah's fatal fantasy. Lucky Jeremiah ...

You can imagine how popular Jeremiah became – especially in Hartford ... I mean, Jerusalem. Everywhere he turned, people were calling him a naysayer at best, and a blasphemer and traitor at worst.

One might think that Jeremiah would at least have the support of the "poor, the widow, and the orphan" – the very people whose lot he (and God) were seeking to improve. Yet it was quite easy for the political and religious leaders of Jeremiah's day to turn these folks against him. All they had to do was fan the flame of religious zeal and wave the flag of Israelite independence and freedom.

I know it may strain credulity that the very people who would benefit most from Jeremiah's message winning the day, and who benefitted the least from Israel's political power grab, would be in lock step with the Jerusalem elite against Jeremiah. I mean, surely you would never find people in the United States who benefit the least from the *status quo* standing with the richest and most powerful proponents of the *status quo* and in opposition to real reform efforts ... Surely you would not find everyday people whipped up into irrational fervor just by waving the flag over guns and the Bible ...

For twenty years, Jeremiah faithfully stood against the growing tide of hollow religiosity and superficial patriotism that masked over social and economic disparity and led to the eventual downfall of their nation. Jeremiah declared that Josiah's religious reforms were a sham, and if Israel continued along its path of oppressing the poor while waving the flag of Israelite independence, the Babylonians would eventually sweep down from the north and destroy Jerusalem – and God would approve of it!

For twenty long years, Jeremiah was mocked and derided for his message. The very religious authorities whose God Jeremiah represented castigated him and declared him a "false prophet."

Really, what defense did Jeremiah have against the charge of false prophecy? The destruction he predicted did not come about for twenty years. According to that old scroll they found in the

Temple, what separates a true prophet from a false one is that their predictions come true. The penalty for being a false prophet is death.

Not only was Jeremiah verbally assaulted with increasing vehemence, but he was physically assaulted as well. On multiple occasions he was imprisoned. Once, Jeremiah was thrown into a muddy cistern by Jerusalem officials, leaving him to sink in the mud and presumably die. He survived numerous other plots on his life.

After so many years of valiantly bearing God's message and taking such heavy abuse for it, Jeremiah finally "loses it" in the scripture we read this morning. He breaks down and cries out to God, "You have *deceived* me, and I was deceived!"

In Hebrew, this sentence is far angrier. The word we translate as "deceived" actually has connotations both of intentional falsehood and of sexual predation. Literally, the English translation that comes closest to the original Hebrew is, "You have *screwed* me, God, and I've been screwed!"

You won't find this in your English Bibles!

After accusing God of screwing him over, Jeremiah launches into a powerful tirade, accusing God of forcing him to proclaim a message he could not help but speak despite his best attempts to hold it in. He complains that even his closest friends have betrayed him. Finally, Jeremiah curses the very day he was born, declaring that he would have greatly preferred dying in his mother's womb.

What a rant!

In hindsight, we know that Jeremiah was absolutely correct in his assessment and predictions about Israel. We know that the destruction brought about by the Babylonians would come to pass. They destroyed Jerusalem, along with many other Israelite cities, and exiled much of the population to live in Babylon in two great waves of deportation. The last king to sit on Jerusalem's throne was captured and tortured by the Babylonians, who then killed the king's sons before his eyes, then pierced his eyes so that this grisly sight was the last thing he saw before being bound in chains and taken to Babylon.

After Jeremiah's predictions actually came true, public opinion of Jeremiah changed significantly. Imagine! Now, he was no longer a traitor or false prophet, but seen as one of the only true prophets in all of Israel. A prophet who loved God and the people so deeply that he continued to proclaim his warnings and get Israel to turn aside from its disastrous course despite all the abuse he took.

Ironically, Jeremiah became so popular among the survivors that a group who were escaping to Egypt begged and pleaded with Jeremiah to come with them to guide their community there. When he refused, they kidnapped him and brought him to Egypt anyway. Jeremiah spent the rest of his days somewhere in Egypt. The very people who once had denounced and derided

him now “loved and adored” him so much that they couldn’t stand the thought of living apart from his wisdom and guidance.

Given that Jeremiah and his message were eventually vindicated, one might wonder why those who preserved his words in Scripture would include his harsh complaints against God. Why wouldn’t they seek to “clean up” the record of Jeremiah’s life and ministry? It would have been so easy to simply hit “delete” on Chapter 20 and its accusation that God had “screwed” him. Wouldn’t it be more inspiring if Jeremiah were depicted as the very model of mental and spiritual stability – a venerable saint who never wavered in his adoration of God and trust that the Lord was his Shepherd?

I think the reason why Jeremiah’s rant at God was retained has to do with an astonishing intuition that the Jewish people had about God, and God’s desire to be in intimate relationship with us.

What these folks desired succeeding generations to know is that *God wants us to offer not just our praise, but our rage.*

Rightly or wrongly, if we are feeling rage at God, we are not only given the freedom to express our feelings, but God actually considers our deepest honesty to be a sign of our most sincere faith.

Why? I can think of at least four reasons.

First, when you express what you honestly feel toward God, especially if those feelings are angry ones, your very honesty shows that you are interested in a real relationship with God, not a fake one. You are unwilling to say one thing with your mouth while feeling something quite different in your heart.

Second, when you express rage to God, it also shows that you trust that God will not seek retribution for your anger, should you just “happen” to be missing part of the greater picture. It shows that you expect that a God who loves you beyond your wildest imagination will actually act like such a God. That’s faith!

Third, when you offer your rage to God, you show that you have faith that God will actually listen to you. If you didn’t expect God to listen, and perhaps even respond, why would you bother speaking to God at all?

Fourth, when you rage at God over the injustices you see going on around you, or are experiencing for yourself, you may not be correct in your assumption that God is to blame, but you at least show God that you give a hoot about justice, and righteousness, and doing “on earth as it is in heaven.” What’s that they say? “If you aren’t angry, you aren’t paying attention?”

Finally, Jeremiah’s example shows us that God wants us not only to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength, but to love *ourselves* as well. Jeremiah knew that if he was created in God’s

very image and likeness, then God must take his needs seriously. The God he loved and adored was not about to consider God's own needs, or the needs of others, without considering Jeremiah's needs as well. When Jeremiah effectively told God, "I have reached the very limit of my ability and willingness to serve you," God respected his limit.

If it still does not make sense to you why the Jewish people would preserve Jeremiah's rant in scripture, or you have any doubt that God wants you to rant at God in addition to praising God, I suggest you try ranting sometime.

If you are sincerely trying to follow where the Spirit is leading you, and you find yourself pushed to your very limits, don't just pray, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ..." but dare to quote Jeremiah: "You have deceived me, and I was deceived!" (Or, if you like, "You have screwed me!").

I don't suggest that make this your final word. Just tell God that this is your word *for the moment*. Your best and most honest act of faith *at the moment*.

Then wait and see how God responds.

I practice what I preach, by the way. I do this myself.

It's not like I rage at God every week or every few months. But every time I have dared to be honest with God about whatever feelings of betrayal or rage I have been feeling, whether my rage has been justified or not, I have received two messages back very quickly and clearly: (1) "Thank you for finally being honest about your feelings"; and (2) "Here's some extra help to remind you that I still love you – love you, in fact, even more than *you* love yourself."