

Jeremiah 15:15 You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake. ¹⁶When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. ¹⁷I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation. ¹⁸Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?

¹⁹Therefore this is what the LORD says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them. ²⁰I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the LORD. ²¹"I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel."

HOW MUCH DO CROSSES WEIGH?

Dear Friends in Christ,

We begin with the first words of Jeremiah from our reading. I will read more later in this sermon. We begin with this thought: ***"You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me."***

It was one of the first questions people asked you: "So what do you want to be when you grow up?" It was a fun and easy question at age five: "A teacher... a police man... a rodeo clown." People love to hear what five-year-olds think of the big-people world.

It is fun when you are five. But as you grow older, the question starts to create anxiety. In high school you realize that people expect you to have plans about your future life—but you're not sure. "I like this or that subject, but I have no idea what job that means" is what the teen-ager is thinking, but also knows that people don't want to hear that. Or maybe you know the job, and you go into that job, but two or three years in you realize that your choice isn't quite what you expected. And if you had known it when you started, you might have gone another direction.

What recruit really understands what awaits him in the next four years in the service, especially if it involves combat. The soldier too, if he had known at the beginning of four years what he knows at the end—well, he might not have signed on that dotted line.

Things don't always turn out the way we imagine.

I wonder what the disciples thought when Jesus told them the words of our Gospel reading: *"If anyone would come after me... he must take up his cross and follow me"* (Mt 16:24). They knew what crosses were far better than we do. At some point in their life, they had probably accidentally (and wished they hadn't) walked out the city gates of Jerusalem or Tiberias or some other city at the same time the Romans were carrying out a gruesome crucifixion. It is the sort of thing—and I say this in all seriousness—it is the sort of thing that if you witnessed it, might just traumatize you for life.

So what did the disciples think when Jesus said, *"Take up your cross?"* It seems that they didn't take Jesus too literally, for even after this, his disciples frequently bickered about who would be greatest in Jesus' kingdom—like it was some sort of home-coming court or popularity contest or reality show.

The cross Jesus was talking about was not like this cross I wear: a nice smooth cross, a piece of

jewelry, pleasing to the eye. No, the cross Jesus had in mind was a splintery piece of lumber, painful, uncomfortable, heavy. And because they re-used those nasty things, probably stained with someone else's blood. What did they think when Jesus said, "Take up your cross"?

One gets the impression that the prophet Jeremiah was as naïve as Jesus' Twelve. He was no wimp. He endured much. But he had that most difficult of crosses—to begin in success and to end in failure. That is a heavy cross.

You see, Israel had this cyclical love-hate, or more accurately worship-rebel relationship with God. They would worship God for a while, and then show up at church a little less often, forget to pray before meals, spend time in places they should not have been spending time, and fall away. And then God would deal with them. If you read a lot in your Bible, you recognize this drum beat of Old Testament history: worship-rebel-punishment-repent; worship-rebel-punishment-repent. It goes for 800 years from the time of Moses up to... Jeremiah. Unfortunate Jeremiah.

Remember that I said he started successful? In Jeremiah's youth, a king named Josiah ruled Israel's southern kingdom, Judah. Josiah led the greatest, the most unexpected, and the last spiritual revival in the nation of Israel. Josiah was the most godly of Israel's kings. Not only was he personally godly, he reformed the entire nation. He got rid of idols. He cleansed the temple. He celebrated the religious feasts like Passover in a way no king, not even David, had ever done. And Jeremiah was part of it. For eighteen years, godly King Josiah and Prophet Jeremiah were tag-team partners in returning God's people to him. What success! What joy! For eighteen years Jeremiah's ministry flourished.

Then King Josiah died, and faith withered in Judah. A godless king ruled in Josiah's place, and in only four years Josiah's 30-year reform was smashed to bits. The new king ordered Jeremiah's arrest. Under pressure from the new, godless king, Jehoiakim, God's flock melted away. Now the message of the prophet Jeremiah was no longer a joyful public proclamation, but outlawed and subversive. Now his message was: "You guys are wicked and God will soon punish you."

Time and again, Jeremiah, with fewer and fewer people standing beside him, continued to proclaim the offensive, repulsive message of God's judgment. You know what we all think of the man on the corner with the crazy hair wearing the sandwich-board with hand painted letters, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." These aren't the sort of people that make lots of friends. And Jeremiah didn't either in this new dispensation. He was like the plague. People avoided him, they fled from him.

But what had he done? He had simply done what God told him to do. God had told him to confront his people with their sins, and he did, boldly, unafraid. In the public eye he was the unshakeable man. When they threatened him with death, he said, "If you must, then here are the rocks."

But it took its toll. While he appeared to all an unshakeable prophet of God, inside he hurt. The cross was heavy on Jeremiah's shoulders. What's that old joke? "Doctor, my elbow hurts when I bend it." "Then don't bend it!" Jeremiah knew that speaking God's word brings him trouble, so he wanted to quit bending his elbow. He wanted to shut up, to stop bringing these problems upon himself, but he realized, *"If I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot"* (Jeremiah 20:9).

Jeremiah was the casualty, caught between a rebellious people and God's judgment. And now Jeremiah's words make more sense: ***"You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me... When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight... I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending?"*** (15-19)

Every serious Christian has been there, at least a little bit. Oh, if you keep your faith hidden, if you

don't ever let others know you are a Christian, the cross isn't all that heavy. But tell someone that having one-too-many isn't just bad form, but sin in God's eyes, and see what they say. Reflect to a new mother that God's word tells us that even newborn children are born in sin and need forgiveness. Tell a young couple who have never been told otherwise, that living together before marriage is a sinful arrangement without God's blessing, and watch their eyes. Tell someone every single person on this earth deserves the fires of hell, and hear what they think of you and your beliefs.

It was easy when you were a child. You grew up believing in Jesus, and the opinions you most valued were your parents'. Their smiling approval on your faith in Jesus convinced you that that "Whatever Jessu says goes." Grow up a few years! Suddenly the most valued opinions in your lives are in stark contrast with your faith. Then you start to feel like a Jeremiah.

You get so worn down by the world that finally you listen to them and compromise. You take one of God's commandments and break it over your knee like kindling. But then you get both barrels. The first barrel is your conscience accusing you of the sin you just committed. The second barrel is your tempters who are kind of glad you finally decided to loosen up a bit, but who sarcastically comment that you don't seem to be enjoying yourself.

"God, why have you put me here? If I didn't have you in my life, it would be so much easier!" And so Jeremiah cries out, "***Will you be to me like a deceptive brook?***" Jeremiah comes to God hoping for comfort, but he feels like the old cowboys chasing down outlaws in the desert. They run out of water and know where the next water hole is, but when they get there it is dry. Jeremiah, all he feels is the cross getting heavier.

So what do you think of Jeremiah? Well, if you ask me, my first thought is: "Thank you, God, for not putting me in Jeremiah's shoes." But beyond that, what should we think of Jeremiah in this 15th chapter?

Many objectionable, sinful words come out of Jeremiah's mouth. He is full of self-pity—"I've worked so hard for you, but I get no appreciation. Blah, blah, blah." He accuses our faithful God of being unfaithful, deceptive. He puffs up his own accomplishments. He wants to be happy and he wants it now. He displays animosity for his enemies. And there are important things he doesn't do. He doesn't treasure the eternal treasures God has given him. He doesn't weigh God's approval greater than man's approval. He doesn't trust that God is working even in these tough times. There is much, a lot, in Jeremiah's complaint that is worthless and worthy of condemnation.

But there is this one thing: he is still coming to God. He began by saying, "***You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me.***" This is not to excuse any of the bad things he says. But he is still coming to God. And maybe it is like how anxiety works on all of us: We start talking to a friend. We share a little of the pent up frustration and like a sand-castle dam, once the water starts to eat away at one point, all of a sudden it all comes gushing out and we can't stop ourselves from saying things, even to God, that we should not say. But at least we are talking to God.

God knows what we are. It is written so tenderly in the 103rd Psalm, "*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust*" (13-14). Our heavenly Father looked at Jeremiah as he looks at us—his children who have been redeemed by Christ. He knows our human weakness so he speaks stern words which are also words of utmost concern, "***If you repent, I will restore you.***" Simply confess that we should not complain, should not doubt; and fully trust that only Jesus' blood-bought merits open the way so that we can approach our God in prayer and worship. Then our heavenly Father forgets all the worthless things we have said and he repeats the promises that we should have remembered all along, words of restoration and strength: "***Let this people turn to you,, but you must not turn to them... they will fight against you, but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you,' declares the LORD.***"

God's gracious promise to Jeremiah does not change.

How heavy are crosses? It is a funny thing. Crosses don't have a standard weight. Some weigh only a few pounds, and others weigh tons. And here is the funnier thing. Each individual's cross sometimes weighs more and sometimes less. But here is one thing that the LORD told Jeremiah, that Jesus told his disciples, and that he promised you, and that Paul confessed, "*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*" (Php. 4:13). Your cross will never be more than you can bear, because through Jesus, God promises to give us strength to carry the cross he has given us.

Never forget the second part of what Jesus said in that Gospel reading. The same one who said, "Take up your cross," also said, "Follow me." And you know where Jesus went. Yes, up there; heaven. Heaven, where there will be no more tears or sorrow or pain, and no more heavy, splintery crosses to bear. Amen.