

“Do We or Don’t We” (19Sept21)
Jeremiah 11:18-20; Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4:3,
7-8a

A mallard and a blue-winged teal. That’s a pair-o’-ducks. An obstetrician and a urologist. That’s a pair-o’-docs.

A contradictory statement that is yet true: that’s a paradox.

These Bible readings today have paradox. For example, on one hand, I could preach them to you. But maybe I don’t want to. It’s a both/and, of “do we or don’t we?”

It’s like saying “look on the bright side” may, indeed, be helpful, positive thinking to reorient your perspective. But that could also be a slap in the face, feeling like it ignores real negative things you’re going through. In a sermon, therefore, you’re unlikely to hear me tell you to look on the bright side.

Jeremiah sure doesn’t seem to look on the bright side, and I might not tell you to take his outlook, either. In these few—seemingly nasty—verses, Jeremiah is praying against his own people, praying because he’d been hurt, praying for God’s retribution, retributive violence as his vision of justice, to pay them back.

Several parts of these verses echo words of the prophet Isaiah that we hear on Good Friday—“a lamb led to the slaughter...cut off from the land of the living” (Is53:7-8)—and during Holy Week, the words are applied to the crucifixion, to the death of Jesus. But it’s hard to imagine Jesus—who preached loving our enemies—wanting Jeremiah’s retribution, praying for violence against those who hurt him.

That may be reason for me to suggest against emulating Jeremiah, to say that you should want reconciliation and shouldn’t pray for pay back. Generally, I guess I would hope for that.

But this sort of prayer abounds in the Bible, and it may fit for you. It may fit because of your own suffering or abuse. Maybe you’re still hurting and can’t bring yourself to want something good for

those who hurt you. It may fit how you need your own restoration.

In these days, it may relate to those resisting vaccines and such, for having caused others enough sickness that they should get what they deserve—and I can’t say whether for you that means they deserve to get sick or to be forced to get vaccinated or what.

With hopes for wellness, in Jeremiah’s prayer, even as he’s praying for destruction of his people, it’s because he wants restoration. That may seem a backward way to go about it. And that’s a paradox, life through death, gain through loss, reconciliation by hatred.

Next—in the Gospel reading—is less of a direct paradox, but still has some yes and some no to it, and I hope we’re able to hold onto both sides seriously. Jesus places a little child in the center and tells us to welcome children as if we’re welcoming Jesus himself.

Our first reaction: we like welcoming children. But a side note paradox: we should maybe flip the image, keeping it in Jesus’ own context, where he could be saying he has no more status or stature than a voiceless, disregarded, helpless child. We might *want* to see God in power and glory. Instead, as Wendell Berry observes in a novel, “Those who wish to see [Jesus] must see him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world” of “ordinary existence,” reshaping our view of greatness.*)

But back to our first reaction about gladly welcoming children, I suspect many of Advent and the MCC are prepared to congratulate ourselves for feeling like children *are* celebrated here and seen as important and allowed to be themselves. I appreciate the ways that is true, including from the great event that Andrea Olson organized Wednesday especially for children, as we continue to welcome Cheyenne Larson, who is in a staff role specifically focused on children and their families. We delight in typical children’s programming—as they sing songs or play instruments at Christmas,

* from Jayber Crow, cited in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter*, p174

as they cry at baptisms, as they tell stories after the Boundary Waters, as they reflect on their faith and appreciation of the MCC in Confirmation faith statements, as we'll get to hear again in a couple weeks. We like these things, partly because we think kids are adorable—able to be adored. I celebrate all that with you.

But for the paradox, what about the both/and, the yes and no? We do and we don't.

For one odd version, if we are asked to put children in the center, right now children certainly aren't. Even more than the rest, children are scattered into their own homes, not welcomed here or present for worship. Yet we're also doing this worship format somewhat out of concern for children and their health risks in gathering. So that's a paradoxical question of whether our children welcomed and centered or not.

If we really want to be welcoming, we must continue to ask how we connect children to or with Jesus. I've been especially worried about them through these long months. Online worship is not particularly welcoming for our children's participation (even less than the rest of you), and that risks that they have fallen to the side.

In general, we must ask more than inviting children into what adults are already doing, but celebrate them for them, treat them with respect, hear their voices, understand their needs...and put those needs even before our own. Maybe we should be—at least in part—asking THEM what they need, not deciding for them. (Which also means that if children really were centered, I wouldn't be using third-person terms, but, kids, I'd be talking more to you. I apologize.)

For the adults, I'd invite you to find ways to support our children—the cards some of you have written, and prayers, and your offerings funding Cheyenne's ministry, but also dreaming of what more we may do and be together.

One more paradox comes from the last verse we heard from the letter of James: "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you."

I don't much like the letter of James. I'm not sure it needed to be in the Bible, because it's not very much about God and even less about Jesus.

It's got all these rules and instructions about what you should be doing, and very little to say about what God is doing. In this verse, God at least is mentioned.

Again, it may be a commendable effort, an encouragement to commit to worship services, promising a way to connect to God and find God closer to you. You could also seek that in prayer life, in Bible reading, in spiritual practices, in small groups, or acts of service that you find more godly. I'm not going to tell you *not* to make a point of being in worship, to devote yourself to it. Nor any other devotion, or volunteering for church, or maybe being quiet in nature, or in loving community.

But, in the perhaps paradox, I'd say the verse from James puts the emphasis in exactly the wrong place. The starting point isn't with you. God's entire goal is to draw near to you. God became incarnate in Jesus in order to get closer to you in your human life and reality. Not only the pious parts, not just for one churchy hour a week, not because you try to draw near.

God wanted to—and wants to—draw near in all your moments, such that there is no place you can go apart from God.

God is with you as a child, as we've heard from Jesus, and also when you age, and even beyond death. God is attending to you in your suffering, as we heard from Jeremiah, but also when you are the enemy causing the suffering, or when you're doing just fine. God is with you throughout your spiritual journey, which isn't a trajectory toward a destination, it simply means your life, because every moment of your life is sustained and held by God, and so every step you take is spiritual. Wherever you are, God draws near to you.

Maybe that's a paradox: nowhere you go can take you away from God.