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Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah. The way of love.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 28. I will also bring back to this place Jechoniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, declares the Lord. For I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Hananiah the prophet in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord. And the prophet Jeremiah said, Amen. May the Lord do so.

May the Lord make the words that you have prophesied come true and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord and all the exiles. Yet hear now this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.

As for the prophet who prophesied peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet. Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke them. And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people saying, Thus says the Lord.

Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years. But Jeremiah the prophet went his way. Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke bars from off the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

Go tell Hananiah. Thus says the Lord, you have broken wooden bars, but you have made in their place bars of iron. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke to serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and they shall serve him. For I have given to him even the beasts of the field. And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, Listen Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you and you have made this people trust in a lie.

Therefore thus says the Lord, behold I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord. In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

In chapter 27, Jeremiah had delivered a message to Zedekiah the king of Judah and to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon and also Tyre and Sidon warning them not to rebel against the king of Babylon. He told them to accept the yoke of the king of Babylon, that they would serve the king of Babylon and after a time that the Lord would judge the king of Babylon and they would be released. However, if they failed to obey the word of the Lord, they would suffer famine, sword and pestilence.

Jeremiah's message had conflicted with that of the establishment prophets. Those prophets had told the leaders that the treasures of the temple that had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar would be brought back. Jeremiah, speaking by the word of the Lord, insisted that this was a vain hope.

Indeed, what they had left in the temple would be taken from them. The events of Jeremiah chapter 28 occur shortly afterwards. In this chapter, rather than speaking generically about the false prophets and their message, Jeremiah has a confrontation with a specific false prophet, Hananiah the son of Azzur.

Jeremiah's message, which was accompanied by the symbolic action of wearing yoke bars and straps, concerned the yoke of the king of Babylon. Hananiah claims that he is declaring the word of the Lord and he addresses his message quite specifically to Jeremiah, opposing him publicly in the house of the Lord. Here Hananiah is a direct adversary of Jeremiah, challenging both his legitimacy and the truth of his message.

Back in Jeremiah chapter 1, when the Lord had first called Jeremiah, he had promised to be with him against all of his enemies. In verses 17 to 19, But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them.

And I behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Hananiah, whose name means the Lord is gracious, delivers a message declaring that the Lord has broken the yoke of the king of Babylon and within two years all of the vessels that had been taken away with Jeconah will be brought back.

Along with Jeconah he will be re-established as king of Judah and all of the exiles will be returned. Various commentators imagine Hananiah seeing himself as standing within the tradition of someone like Isaiah. Isaiah had prophesied the deliverance of Jerusalem from the army of Sennacherib and it had been delivered miraculously in 701 BC.

Perhaps he also sees himself as drawing upon the Davidic covenant and its unconditional promises concerning the establishment of the throne of David. Surely the Lord could never destroy the city of David, the temple and the kingdom of Seccur. Whatever setbacks they experience must be brief in duration.

This is a direct provocation to Jeremiah. It is a direct attempt to delegitimize his entire mission and message. The fact that he does not respond angrily in self-defense probably testifies to his confidence that the Lord is on his side.

However many opponents might rise against him, however general the rejection of him might be among the people, the Lord is standing by his words that he has put in Jeremiah's mouth. He will not allow them to fall to the ground and he will vindicate his prophet in due time. Jeremiah's response to Hananiah is probably tinged with irony or sarcasm.

Indeed it would be marvelous if the Lord brought everything that Hananiah said to pass, but it is a false hope. Ultimately it all rests upon hollow words and beneath that still it rests upon a vision of God that is not in fact true. Trusting in the Lord and proclaiming grand things in his name is absolutely worthless if you are not believing in the true God, if you are not acquainted with his character and not attending to his actual words.

In such a case you are just relating to a projection of man's fancies. This is the tragic situation that the prophets of Judah now found themselves in. They were speaking about a God that was grand and gracious but yet was not the real God at all.

The real God had not spoken the words that they were speaking. The real God was not of

the character that they were suggesting. Theirs was a safe, tame God, a house-trained deity for the temple of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah responds not with anger and defensiveness but with a pointed question to Hananiah. Jeremiah stands in the tradition of prophets who prosecuted the covenant, who proclaimed war, famine and pestilence against countries and kingdoms. Their message was not the comforting message of peace, it was the challenging message of the covenant.

If you are not faithful to the covenant, its curses will fall upon the land. Yet in the mouths of Hananiah and the other prophets, the warnings of the covenant seemed to have been utterly eclipsed by this message of constant peace and reassurance. As their God did not seem to be a God that brought judgement, their message stood in quite stark opposition to those prophets that preceded them that were recognised as true prophets of the Lord.

In the law in Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 21-22, the instruction was given to Israel concerning the words of prophets. And if you say in your heart, How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken? When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken, the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

Jeremiah applies this principle to Hananiah. If the word that he has pronounced indeed comes to pass, then it will be apparent that the Lord has in fact sent him. But if it does not, it will be clear that he has run without being sent.

Hananiah, however, reaffirms his statement. The prophet Jeremiah was wearing the yoke that symbolised his prophecy and Hananiah takes the yoke and breaks it. He repeats his prophecy and goes further by declaring that all of the nations that have been under the king of Babylon will be released within two years.

The basis upon which Hananiah comes up with his false prophecy, whether this is delivered to him by some false source or whether it is something that he comes up with out of his own sense of how things are going, we don't know. But Jeremiah responds by not responding. He walks away.

When the time comes, the Lord will vindicate him. While Jeremiah may be vindicated in the longer term future, the presence of such false prophets makes policy very difficult in the immediate term. How is Zedekiah to determine which of Jeremiah or Hananiah is speaking the truth? If he follows Jeremiah's encouragement to pay attention to the prophecies of the previous prophets and think about their underlying theology, then he will have a clue.

But the presence of conflicting messengers is part of the judgement upon the people of God. A similar situation is seen in 1 Kings chapter 22 when the Lord puts a lying spirit in

the mouths of Ahab's prophets. This introduces confusion, feeds people's delusions and also in the process reveals people's greater appetite for the lie.

In our own day when there are many competing voices claiming to be speaking the word of the Lord, we may be experiencing a similar judgement. Some time later the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and he is sent with a message for Hananiah in particular. Hananiah has broken wooden bars but in their place would be bars of iron.

In resisting the yoke of Babylon, he has resisted the word of the Lord and the yoke of Babylon would be all the harder as a result of it. Indeed the creator of all of the earth, the Lord God of Israel, has established Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon as if a new Adam. He has been given even the beasts of the field to rule over.

Jeremiah declares decisively that Hananiah has not been sent by the Lord. Indeed he has made the people trust in a lie. As the Lord has not sent him, the Lord will remove him or literally send him from the face of the earth.

He will die that very year and a few months later the word of Jeremiah is vindicated as Hananiah dies. The people won't actually have to wait for two years to determine which is the true prophet. This is another example of the Lord fulfilling the promise that he made to Jeremiah back in chapter 1. A question to consider, what are some of the principles that we can apply to test the words that people are bringing in the name of the Lord in a similar way as Jeremiah suggests to Hananiah? If I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast.

It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

As for prophecies they will pass away. As for tongues they will cease. As for knowledge it will pass away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child I spoke like a child. I thought like a child.

I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is one of the most familiar texts in all of Paul, and yet for this very reason one of the

most misunderstood.

It is a text that is often read as an encomium to romantic love at weddings, but as usual it belongs firmly in its context. It is in the middle of an argument. This chapter is part of the argument about spiritual gifts, and its purpose is to put the practice of the spiritual gifts in the appropriate place.

Love isn't so much an alternative to the spiritual gifts as the way in which all such gifts must be exercised. Paul has previously spoken about the importance and primacy of the way of love in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

So Paul talking about the importance of love at this point is not a new theme in his letter. This chapter identifies the precise antidote to the Corinthians' inappropriate spirituality. It is an integral part of Paul's larger argument, but is also a praise of love, an expression of its superlative character.

Love is that which must govern everything. All expressions of the Christian life and practice. By describing and praising love, Paul exposes the problems of the Corinthians, and he offers an alternative model for them to pursue.

It begins with the absolute necessity of love in the first three verses, then describes the glories of love in verses 4-7, its characteristics and traits, and in verses 8-13 it contrasts the spiritual gifts and their provisional character to the enduring nature of love. This love, of course, then, is not romantic sentimentality or love as such, but it is a love that follows the pattern of Christ's own love. Love, Paul argues, is indispensable.

Even the most elevated and remarkable spiritual gifts and practices, practiced apart from love, are worse than empty. Without love, being able to speak by the Spirit not just in human tongues but also, supposedly, in angelic tongues, will be of no greater value than the sort of instruments that one finds in pagan worship – noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. The Corinthians prided themselves on their spiritual knowledge, yet that too is worthless apart from love.

Love, as Paul has argued in chapter 8, is how we know things truly. Supposing we had faith sufficient to remove mountains, here Paul alludes to Matthew 17, verse 20, For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. Even if they have that sort of faith, in the absence of love they are nothing.

Let us suppose that they sell all their worldly goods and give them to the poor. That too gains them nothing without love. At this point in the text there is debate over whether we should read, Deliver up my body to be burned, or deliver up my body in order that I may boast.

It may be a reference to martyrdom, perhaps giving oneself into slavery for Christ. Yet even the most extreme self-sacrifice is worthless apart from love. Paul now moves to describe love's defining traits, clearly contrasting with the behaviour of the Corinthians to this point.

Love is patient. Patience is absolutely essential when dealing with others. Without patience little can be accomplished.

Patience is taking time with people. Patience is giving time to people. Patience is making time for people.

Patience is choosing your time with people. This is the behaviour of love. Love is kind.

It's generous, benevolent, noble. It's an active alternative to anger and resentment. It breaks their cycles.

It interrupts them and starts something new. Love does not envy. It's not caught up in the status-seeking and the quest to pursue advantage over others that was so characteristic of the Corinthians.

It does not boast. You could think of the Corinthians' slogans and their claims for themselves that they rule like kings. Theirs was a form of spirituality that boasted in status and over others.

Love is not arrogant. It does not seek or inflate its own importance as the Corinthians did, their brand of knowledge puffed up in pride. But love is of a very different character.

Love is not rude. It's mindful of the manner in which it treats others. It's concerned for appropriate social order and propriety.

We might think of the rudeness of the Corinthians and their behaviour at the table of the Lord. Their dishonouring, neglect and despising of each other. We might also think about Paul's teaching about head coverings.

People who want to express their own authority and their own freedom could act in a way that dishonoured their head, that dishonoured themselves and also dishonoured others. Love is courteous. It honours decorum and politeness.

We'll see this even more in the chapter that follows. Love does not insist on its own way. Love does not revolve around its own interests.

It's prepared to surrender its rights for others. Love becomes all things to all men. Love is prepared to make sacrifices for the weaker brother.

Love is prepared to abstain from exercising rights that might wound others. Love is not irritable or resentful. It's not easily provoked to anger or bitterness.

Its lack of preoccupation with its own rights allows it to suffer wrong without reacting out of grievance, wounded pride, vengefulness or entitlement. Such love would not be given to the litigious behaviour that the Corinthians were given to in chapter 6. Love doesn't keep score. How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Love isn't preoccupied with such questions.

Love does not tally up those petty grudges in its mental register, the ways that in our status-seeking we try and put ourselves ahead of others or reckon their debt to us. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. It grieves at the sin of the man in a relationship with his father's wife.

We can so often delight in other people's failings and sins. We see our enemy fall into sin and we rejoice. It enables us to feel superior and self-righteous.

We gossip about other people's sins, sharing them as if they were a matter of entertainment. Love, however, wishes what is good, in our own lives, in the lives of our enemies. Love rejoices in the truth.

It's not about self-interest. It's about something that stands over against us, the truth itself. Love desires and rejoices in integrity.

Truth never tidily aligns with our personal interests. But love wants to know the truth. It isn't defensive before the truth.

It lets its own interests be compromised for the sake of something greater, the truth itself. Love bears all things. Love is that which never ceases to support.

It keeps holding up relationships with others, even under the greatest burden and pressure. Love believes all things. It believes through all things.

It never surrenders faith, not in human goodness, but in God. It perseveres with people, even when it might seem that they are beyond recovery. Love hopes all things.

It never despairs of people or situations. Love endures all things. It never gives up on or abandons people.

Love is permanent in a way that the spiritual gifts are not. They are transitory. The fact that Paul is speaking into the Corinthian context is very clear here.

Prophecies, tongues and knowledge are temporary and partial. When the fullness of revelation comes, spiritual gifts will pass away. These sign gifts are primarily for the purpose of attesting the truth of the Gospel as it is first preached.

As time goes on, they become less prominent. The Corinthians, who think that they already reign and have little sense of the not yet of the Gospel, struggle to perceive the temporary character of the spiritual gifts. The time will come when those gifts will fade

or pass away.

When they pass away, they will be replaced by something greater. Paul seems to allude to Numbers 12, 6-8, the contrast between the faint and limited revelation that Aaron and Miriam and others had and that enjoyed by Moses. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Love is unique in the fact that it endures into the age to come.

Faith, hope and love are the Christian virtues. They are listed on several occasions in Paul and he explores their interrelationship in a number of different ways. For instance, in Romans 5, 1-5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace by which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Galatians 5-6 For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. The spiritual gifts may be the scaffolding, but love is the mortar of the building of the church. The gifts and the manifestations will one day be removed, but what will be left is the love by which the building is established.

A question to consider. Chapter 12 ends with the words And I will show you a still more excellent way. This looks forward to the argument of chapter 13.

How can the argument of chapter 13 be tied closely into the argument of chapter 12? In what respect does it represent a more excellent way than something in chapter 12?