

Pastor Roy's sermon from August 14, 2016

Novelist Susan Howatch suggests the only prize worth winning is love. Yet so many other details, ambitions, and goals have our attention.

Jeremiah's word of the Lord is like fire and a hammer that breaks rock in pieces. Jeremiah has learned that there are helpful and unhelpful religious practices. There were in his day common religious rituals and prophets which comforted people falsely--as they ignored the needs of their neighbors. Injustice and greed were accepted as folks being responsible and frugal--they were good religious people. To most--but not for Jeremiah. For him there religion was an empty well. A tree without fruit. A river without fish. He called the people to reject such religion and instead practice justice and compassion--true freedom.

Hebrews exalts the faithful who lived lives of justice and faithful love rather than impulsively reacting to circumstances. And these faithful, when pressed hard, released their lives into the care of God. This cloud of faithful people has never been perfect, but they stretched forward toward mercy and peace--toward the love of God. They courageously swam against the current, yet enjoyed the moment by moment rewards of faithfulness. Such rewards are not comfort and ease, but love, trust, hope and peace. Faithful love does not look for advantages but to live and participate in the life of God. Faithful love is the communion of relationships.

Jesus speaks of fire on the earth and his coming baptism, not by water, but by fire on a cross. He did not come for enjoyment, but to live faithfully--no matter what--sometimes resulting in joy, sometimes in pain. Even if it leads to execution or assassination, he will faithfully proclaim the message of justice and live with compassion in the presence of God.

All of these lessons point to faith not as something that prepares us for the future, but as the practice of the presence of God's mercy and love. Jesus' death was not about the future, it was about being faithful in the moment. I'm afraid that for many Christians today faith is not about what is going on right now, but about something Jesus did 2000 years ago so we could live in some heaven and escape all the messy trouble on this earth.

The passages we've heard today remind us that faith is about faithfulness today. Faith gives us courage to live in God's justice, today. We struggle with what that means. We struggle to practice the just mercy of God. But faith is not playing make believe. Faith is practice. Faith is receiving love to share love.

I heard a Syrian American physician who was headed back to Syria. When asked why he was returning to such a dangerous place where hospitals are regularly targeted by all sides, he responded that he had to go where there was such a great need, even if it costs his life. Some things are clearly worth dying for. Perhaps we should reconsider some of the questions we ask of our politicians and ourselves. Perhaps security and peace is found less in crushing some opposition and more in practicing some faithful, courageous love.

Perhaps this is why this morning's passages sound so odd to our ears. We are used to thinking about what will make our lives better and safer, not what will make the lives of the people around us, around the world, better and safer.

So faith pushes us to ask, What is worth dying for? What is worth living for? What does it mean to be faithful? Is it about being good? Or is it about resting in *God's* goodness so that we are free to live with courageous love?! God give us faith which seeks justice now rather than comfort in the future.