

When God Gives a Nudge

Sermon 4/6 of Jeremiah series

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So Jesus says to this Canaanite woman, “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” ... Really? That seems rather harsh and even cruel – especially for Jesus. Like you, I would imagine, that story has given me pause each time I’ve read it. But over the years, I’ve concluded – in light of both how Jesus has this way of peering into the hearts of the folks he encounters, as well as the way the story ends – that there was a method in Jesus madness. Rather than dissing this woman, Jesus was seeing something within her and decided to give her a bit of a nudge to bring it out. That “something” was faith, and, indeed, his nudge brought out a clever and even witty reply: “Yes it *is* [right], Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” And at that point, I think there was a smile and a twinkle in Jesus’ eye as he said, “Well played!” ... or rather, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” Which is sort of the same thing.

This past week, I was thinking about this nudge thing and how God does it again and again in the Bible. I was thinking about it in particular with regard to our sermon series on Jeremiah when I ran into my friend Scott at Starbucks. I’ve mentioned Scott on occasion in the past– a friendly skeptic who, when it comes to matters of Jesus and faith, says he’s interested but not buying. And so our conversations always contain a certain amount of challenge and good-natured give and take.

Scott was interested to hear of the latest developments here at St Timothy’s – and that I was going to be preaching again. “So what are you preaching on?” he asked. I told him about Jeremiah and about how God used everyday events around the prophets to inspire them in what they would say. In this case, I said, I was looking at a text where Jeremiah had watched a potter reshaping a piece of clay. The message that then came from God was: “My people Israel, can’t I do the same

with you? If I say that I am going to destroy a nation and the nation changes its ways, then I will change my intent to destroy them. So turn from your evil ways and reform your lives and your actions.”

“So let me get this straight,” Scott replied, looking at me skeptically. “You’re saying you think that people can do things to get God to change his mind? Really? So let’s think about that. I thought you believed that God already knows everything that’s going to happen. What possible new information could come to him to make him change?”

“Yes, I believe he knows,” I said. “Yet right from the beginning we find these interesting conversations when God is about to punish someone. He doesn’t just destroy the wicked city of Sodom, for instance, but rather he first tells Abraham his plans. Abraham then objects, ‘But Lord, what if there are fifty righteous people there?’ – and he bargains with God all the way down to ‘What if there are ten?’ ‘If there are ten righteous people,’ God says, ‘I won’t destroy the city.’ But there weren’t ten. Just Lot and his wife. One wonders what might have happened if Abraham had continued down to ‘What if there is only one?’”

“So,” Scott said, “you’re saying Abraham argues with God and God seems willing to budge ... provided the right number of good folks are found. And then you see the same sort of thing in Jeremiah where, if people change, then God will change his mind about them.”

“Well, actually,” I confessed, “the Bible puts it even more strongly in Jeremiah. In the most literal translations, God says, ‘If that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.’ Other translations try to dodge that uncomfortable statement, but it’s there.”

Scott tilted his head with a rather amused look. “Really? God repents of evil? Come now, you can’t be serious ... not if you believe what you’ve always been saying about God being perfect ... and wanting *us* to repent of evil. If *God* needs to repent of evil, don’t we sort of have the pot calling the kettle black?”

“Yeah,” I said, “on the surface it does rather sound that way. But the more I read the Bible, the more I’m convinced something else is going on. Because it’s not just here. We read of God ‘repenting of evil’ in a fair number of places. Do you know the story of the golden calf?”

“Sort of,” Scott replied. “Isn’t that when Moses went up on Mt Sinai to get the Ten Commandments? And down below, the people got tired of waiting for him and decided to build a god of their own – a golden calf.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Exodus 32. Moses is up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments and meanwhile his brother Aaron is down below helping people build this golden calf. God was not amused, of course, and tells Moses that he’s going to destroy the people and start all over again ... with Moses. Sort of like starting with Noah again after the flood. At *that* point, when Moses hears what God is going to do, he replies in a rather bold and surprising way. ‘Don’t do that,’ he tells God. ‘The Egyptians will say you just brought your people out here to destroy them. LORD, repent of this evil you are about to do to your people.’ And this is the first place in the Bible that anyone is told to repent.”

“Say again?” Scott replied. “Moses tells *God* to repent of evil? I’ve so got to hear what happened next. I would expect Moses to be toast ... but I know that doesn’t happen. I’ve seen the movie. The story goes on and he still gets the Ten Commandments.”

“What happens next,” I said, “was both simple and astounding. After Moses’ rather long speech, in which he calls God to repent of evil, the Bible ends the story with a single verse: “And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people.” Again, that’s the most literal translation. Other translators seem to get a bit nervous about that language and tone it down to something like ‘the LORD changed his mind,’ or ‘the LORD relented,’ ... but it sort of comes out to be the same thing, doesn’t it? Someone challenges God and God changes direction.”

“Abraham and Moses,” Scott reflected. “And you say there are other places like this in the Bible?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I’ve already mentioned Jeremiah, where this happens more than once. But the one that I find most interesting is the case of someone far less faithful than these folks. Jonah. God sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh, another awful city. Jonah hates Nineveh, doesn’t want to go, refuses to go, tries to flee by heading west across the Mediterranean and gets brought back in the belly of a big fish. So Jonah, resigned and grumbling, trudges off to Nineveh. But once he gets there, he doesn’t say or preach anything helpful. He simply delivers a short, sour message: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ Eight words, end of sermon, out the city gate he goes. Not exactly what God had in mind, I’d guess, but God works with it. The Bible says the people of Nineveh ‘turned from their evil way’ and then – once again – we read:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it.

Scott and I sat there for a moment, sipping our coffee and thinking about these strange but consistent texts. Finally, I said, “Here’s what I think we’re seeing, Scott. In each of these encounters, we find God saying to someone, ‘I’m about to destroy some folks – so go ahead, now; tell me not to do it.’ And in each case, that nudge from God – that challenge – pulls someone into a conversation with God in which they plead for someone – and God then ‘repents,’ as it were. And here’s the thing: in each case – Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, even Jonah – God is the one who sets the whole thing up by nudging someone. Each time. Clearly, he *wants* this to happen. Clearly he *wants* someone to challenge him to be merciful.”

“Hmmm,” Scott replied. “So you think God may be sort of baiting folks – nudging them, as you say.”

“Sort of,” I said. “Scott, the thing that strikes me in each case is that God appears to be trying to draw us into the conversation. To pull us out of being so wrapped up in ourselves and bring us back into the relationship with him – and this, finally, for the sake of others. For instance, the first thing we find in the story of Adam and Eve sinning

and trying to hide is God coming and calling out, “Adam, where are you?” Surely God knew where Adam was; the question was, Did *Adam* know where Adam was? And could he be drawn back into the relationship?”

“So,” Scott said, “you’re saying that God may not really be the thunderbolt thrower we often think him to be – even though he seems to talk a lot about doing that sort of thing – but rather that his end game is really to pull wandering folks back into a relationship and sometimes to nudge them to challenge him? Interesting. Have to think about that a bit. Anyway, enough for this morning; I’ve got to go” And so our conversation was once again put on hold and awaits another day.

The one place Scott and I didn’t get to in our talking about Jeremiah and the potter – the one place I really wish we *had* gotten – was the place that Jeremiah just couldn’t see. All those nudges God gives in the Old Testament – to Abraham who prays for Sodom, to Moses and Jeremiah who end up praying for Israel, to Jonah who doesn’t *want* Nineveh to repent but God uses his lousy sermon and they repent anyway! – all these nudges are preparation for something much bigger. They open the eyes of God’s people to God’s desire to have mercy –to his continual pushing *toward* mercy. Toward the cross, finally. By the time we turn from the last page of the Old Testament to the first page of the New, we find a prepared and anticipating people, a people waiting for God to do something for their sake and for the sake of the world.

So is it all just a game? Is God not serious when he speaks of judgment against sin? Yes, he’s serious. Nineveh was spared when it repented, Jerusalem was not when it refused, as we heard last week. Alvin Rogness, former president of Luther Seminary, once put it this way: “I must never cease to tremble before God’s judgment; I must never cease to rest in the overarching mercy of his love. If I lose either, I lose God.” Not really lose God, of course, but lose my grasp on the true nature of God – on the judgment-mercy tension that exists *in* that nature.

Judgment ... mercy. So which is it? Only in the cross – only in God entering our world in the person of Jesus – only in his bearing the weight

of the judgment of our sin in his death on the cross, and then offering us forgiveness after overcoming that very death – only in all this do we find that tension of judgment and mercy resolved. Jeremiah couldn't see that far, and so Jeremiah is only able to bring us to the door but not yet open it for us – though he comes very close, as we will hear in a couple of weeks.

Nudges, challenges – they come to us in many forms, they do. Sometimes, we can describe what God does in our lives as a nudge, sometimes as a reshaping of the clay, sometimes as pruning. Perhaps sometimes it even comes as a cold reboot like you have to do when your computer just flat out locks up. That's what finally happened to Israel. Whatever the case, I'm convinced of these things:

First, God wants good for you – so much so that he's willing to drop down to your level and nudge you to challenge him in prayer when you sense things are not right. That's what we've been hearing this morning. Has life gone sour for you or for someone you love? Does God seem absent in it all – or even working against you? Know that God is willing and waiting for you to challenge him as did Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah – as did Job and some psalm writers – because he wants good for you.

Second, God wants relationship with you – and at times I can't imagine why he wants to bother with us, we are such grief, but it started with “Adam, where are you?” and continued through his call of Abraham and Moses and Jeremiah – and even unwilling Jonah – continues right to this day. In his Word, in the words you are hearing right now, and through this community of faith, God is saying, “I want a relationship with you.”

God wants good for you, God wants relationship with you, and therefore, finally, God at times wants to nudge you – perhaps at times to reshape you or even reboot you – in such a way that he can use you nudge others. Is there a friend God wants you to talk to – or to make up with? Is there a tough moral decision facing you at work? Are there areas of opportunity here at St Timothy's that God has been nudging you to consider? Are there things you and your spouse need to talk about in

your marriage? Because – know this – the main way God works in our world is through you and through me, through all his faithful people.

You see, one thing I have learned at age 72 is that God continues to shape and reshape us throughout our lives – like that piece of clay Jeremiah saw on the potter's wheel. So, my friend, how is God shaping or reshaping you this morning? How, and in what direction, and for whom, might he be nudging you right now?