



“A LITTLE MUCH”
SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 4: 11-12, 22-28; LUKE 15: 1-10
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 15, 2019
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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

4:11 At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse--

4:12 a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them.

4:22 "For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good."

4:23 I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.

4:24 I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro.

4:25 I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled.

4:26 I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

4:27 For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end.

4:28 Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Luke 15:1-10

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

15:3 So he told them this parable:

15:4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

15:5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

15:6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'

15:7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

15:8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

15:9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'

15:10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

It's a little much, don't you think? All that fuss on a day that's supposed to be Holy, set apart, and here comes Jesus stirring the pot—or maybe he's not stirring it, but the things he is doing are making other people stir the pot.

Well-meaning people—priests and lawyers and temple administrators, professionals—you know, church people. And we all know that they wouldn't be upset if there wasn't a really good reason to be upset, right?

I mean he's a little much, isn't he—Jesus I mean. Why does he need to go and make so many decent, law-abiding people so uncomfortable?

After all, there is a right and a wrong way to do things. I mean we can all agree on that, can't we?

It's just not good form to be seen with certain people—reputation matters, you know. What will people think if you're cozy with those people—you know who I'm talking about.... those people who can't ever seem to not need something, those people who wear clothes that are inappropriate, those people who don't know how to act or talk or fit in.... those people.

It's a little much to expect us to be ok with just anyone around—it's not just uncomfortable, it's not safe... in fact it's unacceptable.

And while we're at it, Jeremiah is a little much, too.

I mean coming into the temple and telling us God thinks we're stupid, that we don't know how to do good, that our way of life has consequences.

And then threaten us—law abiding, temple-going people, with the destruction of the world and say it's our fault the world is crumbling around us. I mean, it's a little much, don't you think, to make us all feel so uncomfortable about our lives?

You know, as long as we're at it... the Bible is really a little much... there's so much in there that doesn't really make sense, or that isn't even true... why should we let something like the Bible ruin a lovely dinner party—or a feel good moment—or a chance to get ahead in the world and move up the social ladder?

Just how far is this table supposed to extend? How big is it supposed to be?

Imagine, a place of perfect welcome, a place to sit down and be truly nourished for every sinner and outcast, for every broken and bewildered person, for every lost soul, for every single human being who has ever lived, breathed, and struggled to find our footing in this world.

A foretaste of heaven's beautiful being and belonging.

We're the people who are supposed to believe in that in-breaking reality of God's creation healed—we're the people who seek to believe in it enough to try and practice being there if only for a moment together in God's sweet welcome home.

This Table's mystery and power is its promise—that this kind of welcome, this kind of soul food, this kind of healing is what Christ prepares for this broken world—this world that he inhabits even now, even here.

It's a little much, isn't it; to ask a bunch of rational thinkers, a bunch of over stimulated consumers, a bunch of skeptical followers to really believe this kind of welcome can be true?

But stay with me here discerning, thoughtful Presbyterians, and think about it for a minute. Perhaps the most concrete, clear, and consistent layer of Jesus' life on this planet was his repeated and rebellious act of sitting down to eat.

Jesus' Table Fellowship was central to his ministry—in fact, it was his most radical tool of transformation. It defined and distinguished him—and it was a big part of what made the powers that be repulsed by him.

Eating was a central part of this early Mediterranean culture. Sitting down with someone, hosting them for a meal, sharing food with them signaled full acceptance, a full embrace.

And if there is anything Jesus is clear about in the Gospel it is that how you, how we practice table fellowship is a litmus test of whether we are really down for what this whole Jesus following thing is all about.

Just one chapter ago in Luke, Jesus is eating with the Pharisees themselves. Scripture tells us he was under close scrutiny during that meal—and that before he sat down, on his way in to the meal, he cured a man on the Sabbath—a man with dropsy—a body swollen, retaining fluid for who knows what reason, a man who was unclean. (Luke 14)

The religious officials, the ones known as faithful and pious, were silent when Jesus asked them what they do on the Sabbath when they see someone in pain, when they see someone in need.

In chapter 7 of Luke, Jesus is telling anyone who will listen to take a hard look at themselves—to see how they struggle to see God's hand in their lives. He reminds them of what people are saying about him: "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34)

Even those who say they see Jesus disparage his table practices—they call him a lush, someone who eats and drinks too much—someone who eats and drinks with the wrong people.

Jesus' eating habits and the company he kept is a clear directive to us—we are people who gather at table to follow after Jesus. The question is, how does this Table challenge and change us—how does this Table define us?

The Pharisees are the ones who distinguished themselves by their adherence to purity laws. Adhering to the purity laws is how they measured their faithfulness. It was the way they exercised discipleship. It was their metric for righteousness. Eating with those who did not observe these purity practices was something these faithful ones had to avoid in order to maintain their purity.

So it wasn't necessarily about not *wanting* to eat with marginal people, sick people, people who were seen as unclean, it was about not being *able* to eat with those people and maintain good standing in the religious community, and even in God's eyes.

Jeremiah's warning to the faithful of his time: your rebellion against God will be your downfall.

Jesus' warning to the faithful of his time: your perceived righteousness is a barrier to true faith. Your practices of righteousness are a barrier to beloved community.

This Table really means nothing if the welcome is not merciful enough, radical enough to heal the world. That means you and I encounter something categorically more here—enough to kindle a God-given joy in what it feels like to be fully embraced and fed.

And like the shepherd who rejoices in the lost one found, like the woman who recovered what had gone missing—this joy is not something we can keep to ourselves, it is something we want to share; it is something we want to celebrate.

Eucharist is gratitude—a way of being in the world that always begins with thanksgiving for God's trustworthy provisions in our lives.

Gratitude that does not fold into generosity is really not gratitude at all.

If we are truly feasting on God's radical welcome for us, then our lives must communicate such courageous, humble, and consistent generosity. Remember Jesus' Table Fellowship was his most radical tool of transformation. It defined and distinguished him—and it was a big part of what made the powers that be repulsed by him.

Can we let the generosity and radical welcome of this table truly define us? That is the challenge of our time, Grace Covenant. At such a time as this, can we live eucharistically in a world that will tell us its too much—too much to ask, too much to expect, too much to risk.

If it sounds like a little much for you—a little more than you can handle, maybe too good to be true, please keep coming back for more until you taste and see the promise that we feast on here—that the kingdom of God is God's whole creation healed.

Nothing less than the integrity of our lives together is at stake.

Thanks be to God.