

**Yr. A, Proper 7**  
**June 21, 2020**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1658 Words**

**Lessons: Jeremiah 20:7-13**  
**Psalms 69:8-11, 18-20**  
**Romans 6:1b-11**  
**Matthew 10:24-39**

This story begins with a dark-skinned<sup>1</sup> mother, crying herself to sleep every night. Her husband has a reputation for a violent temper, and for adultery. But the tears—they were for her son. She prayed, “Answer me, O God, in your great mercy.”<sup>2</sup>

Her boy was very sick; it could go either way. Even the father could see that.<sup>3</sup> He sympathized with his wife...for a while. She kept praying, “Answer me, O Lord, for your love is kind.”<sup>4</sup> I have no doubt she prayed the way Jesus prayed, and the way *we* just prayed, with the Psalms of David to voice our complaint.

How are you praying your way through all of the concerns, disappointments, and exhaustion of 2020? One way to move beyond a bland, vanilla prayer life is to pray the psalms. Singing, speaking, or crying your way through these 150 everlastingly relevant prayers is a surefire way to meet God with honesty.

This is not my original idea, you know. The vocabulary of Jeremiah, the ‘weeping prophet’ who lived 600 years before Christ, (*his* vocabulary) is steeped in the language of the Psalms, as we just heard.

“O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” Jeremiah complains to God that speaking out on God’s account has made him a laughingstock. On the other hand, Jeremiah complains, “There is a burning fire...in my bones. I’m weary with holding it in, and I cannot (do that any longer).”<sup>5</sup>

I think I may know how Jeremiah felt. Like you, I was trudging through May with heaviness in my soul. The coronavirus changed all of our carefully laid plans, and it’s not even right to complain about ‘plans’ in the face of 120,000 deaths, and millions of people trying to recover—medically, economically, emotionally, and spiritually.

And then, a policeman in Minnesota did a heartless, gutless, criminal thing. He refused to stop kneeling on the neck of a handcuffed, completely subdued human being who begged for his life. And my bones have ached to speak about this and other injustices which get recorded on cell phones often enough for all of us to easily stop living in denial about the reality of racism.

At the same time, I have felt exhausted trying to find the right thoughts, words, and actions which might make a meaningful difference. I recently spoke about this with one of my black friends who loves me enough to challenge me by saying, “Yeah, brother, I know what you mean. We are exhausted too!”

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine’s mother is believed to have been a Berber (dark-skinned) resident of Thagaste on the basis of her name, according to Power, Kim (1999) “Family, Relatives”, pp. 353-54 in *Augustine through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*. Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.) *Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans*.

<sup>2</sup> From today’s appointed Psalm 69:15.

<sup>3</sup> These and subsequent details about the life of St. Augustine and his mother are drawn from Fr. John Julian, OJN, *Stars in a Dark World: Stories of the Saints and Holy Days of the Liturgy*, (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2009) and from *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*, (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2010)

<sup>4</sup> From today’s appointed Psalm 69:18.

<sup>5</sup> Direct quotes from Jeremiah’s complaint in chapter 20, vs. 7-13.

People of color have even more reason to feel exhausted. They make up a disproportionate number of the victims of Covid-19 because they live in more crowded places, work ‘essential jobs’ in more vulnerable spaces, and depend upon more crowded forms of transportation.

An insufferable state senator from Ohio looked past all these obvious reasons in order to suggest a really dehumanizing reason. “Maybe they just don’t wash their hands as much,” he said. It’s a wonder we are not *all* praying the words of Psalm 123 right now—“Lord, have mercy, for we’ve had *more than enough* of contempt, too much of the scorn of the indolent rich, and of the derision of the proud.”<sup>6</sup>

I want to return to the story of the mother whose son was desperately ill. The good news is that her prayers were answered. He survived! The bad news is that he became wayward and lazy. At 17 he left his mom and their small town, and moved to the big city where he took up with a woman. He became a father, but not a husband. I wonder how many more tears his mother shed as she kept him in her prayers.

We all face a temptation, and it’s particularly challenging for privileged people. It is the temptation of ‘papering over’ our own faults as mere ‘indiscretions,’ while pointing to those very same faults as the obvious reasons why certain *other people* are struggling to get by. Are you tempted—like me—to make assumptions about the family in my story? You know what I mean—a steadfast mother, a disappointing father, and a lazy, wayward teenager who becomes a father before he becomes an adult.

There is a very short, well-worn pathway between the idea that “it’s not my fault” and the conclusion that “it’s not my problem.” This is *not* the way of love, nor is it the way of Jesus. Jesus went out of his way to heal people who did *not* deserve his help. Jesus went out of his way to feed people who did *not* deserve his generosity. Jesus went out of his way to die for people—like you & me—who *do not* deserve his saving grace. This is what we say we *believe*, but it is not how we act when we shrug off hurting people by assuming, “Not my fault. Not my problem.”

That young man in my story is not an African American, but he *is* an African. When he was 29-years-old he secretly hopped on a boat headed for Rome. He didn’t tell his mom, because he knew she would try to stop him. Like most immigrants, he dreamed of a better life. Are you tempted—like me—to make some assumptions about whether he *deserved* a chance at a new life? You know what I mean—leaning on other people to get ahead...which is what privileged people get to do discretely with family and friends.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus gives his disciples the hard news. “If they call me the ‘master of demons,’” Jesus says, “just imagine what they are going to call you!”<sup>7</sup> And so, he offers this encouragement to those of us who follow him: “Do not fear.” Jesus then repeats himself, “Do not be afraid.” ...not because it’s *easy* to get involved with divisive moments in history, but because we are on God’s side when we stand up for the poor. We are on God’s side when we speak out for the hurting, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. We are on God’s side when we follow Jesus—*out of his way*—to help people who have been put down, pushed aside, and discriminated against simply because of who they are.

Jesus is honest about the fact that God’s kingdom is *not* a neutral concept. There are winners, and there are losers. In God’s kingdom, those who have been winning in a rigged system will hate losing their power and control. (Just read his parables about judgment.) So, we should *expect* the scorn of the indolent rich, the derision of the proud, and even contempt within our families. Yet, the *beauty* of God’s kingdom is how losers receive more grace than they deserve, and become eternally grateful followers of Jesus who are willing to go *out of their way* for other people’s sake.

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 123:4-5 in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 780.

<sup>7</sup> This paraphrase of Jesus’ full disclosure to his newly called disciples is found in today’s pericope, Matthew 10:24-39.

At 33, that young African man was finally baptized. He went on to become the greatest theologian in the history of Western Christianity. It's not an exaggeration to say that much of what you and I believe about sin, salvation, and the Kingdom of God is a direct result of his teaching. St. Augustine of Hippo stands as a towering reminder that we should be careful with our assumptions.

Part of the exceptional character of St. Augustine *we could imitate* in this present moment is his example of relentless self-examination of his own faults. His prayer (and book), titled *The Confessions*, is 13 chapters long! I believe his confessions gave him the courage to forgive others who failed miserably in living up to God's standards.

Against the unforgiving, Donatist heretics, St. Augustine reminds us—*even today*—that the people of the Church are holy, not because of our past (which—let's face it—is filled with trespasses and missed opportunities). Rather, the people of the Church are holy because our *purpose* is holy! And that means our *future* is holy, no matter what we have done or left undone in the past.

Dear people, Christ calls us to *believe*—not just in him, but also in ourselves. We just heard St. Paul urge us not only to *believe* in newness of life, but to *walk* in newness of life<sup>8</sup>...to stand up and walk with Christ out of our way to speak up for, heal, feed, serve, and show mercy to people who have been put down, pushed aside, and discriminated against because of who they are.

Will we be scorned? Probably so. Will we be on God's side? Absolutely, because we will be *beside* Christ, who was crystal clear about whose side *he was on!*

At the dawn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Roman Empire was in serious decline. St. Augustine had returned to Africa and been ordained priest and then bishop. He spent 14 years composing his seminal work, titled *The City of God*. It is the greatest, most enduring political statement ever written to the glory of God. In the 14<sup>th</sup> book of this volume he writes: "Two cities have been formed by two loves: The earthly (city) by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly (city) by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. In the one, the princes...are ruled by the *love of ruling*; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love."<sup>9</sup>

Dear people, we are living through a time of trial. It is just like Jeremiah, the psalmist, and Jesus said it would be. I hope this story of St. Augustine shines a helpful light on your path, and serves as a hopeful, challenging reminder that we are called to a holy purpose and a holy future. It is never too late to dream, pray, and work for the vision of the City of God, on earth as it is in heaven, with peace and love, liberty and justice, *for all* people.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> This exhortation by Paul to 'walk in newness of life' appears in today's pericope, Romans 6:1b-11.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book XIV, Chapter 28.