

The Homegrown Threat

In the name of him who tests the hearts and minds of men and who judges them righteously, dear friends in Christ: Keeping track of current events these past few weeks we have all been painfully reminded of what a dangerous and uncertain place the world – and even our own nation – really is. When defenseless Amish children in a one room school house in rural Pennsylvania become the targets of senseless violence you have to wonder if there's any place that's truly safe. This last assault was particularly sinister; and it coupled with a recent spate of school shootings and narrowly averted planned school shootings has done much to darken the national mood. And I think that what's most disturbing about it is where the threat is coming from. We understand that there are folks *out there* in the world who don't like us. We have fought many wars in our history – too many, perhaps; but we're quite used to having enemies *out there*. And though it's rarely happened (December 7th and 9-11 come to mind) we can even understand when a foreign enemy attacks us on our own soil. We don't like it; but we can certainly see why they'd want to do it – they are our enemies, after all. But when the attack comes from the inside, when it's one of our own neighbors waging war on us, it's especially hard to bear. Tim McVeigh's attack on the Federal building in Oklahoma City a few years back is a case in point. When it happened, it was the worst incident of terrorism to take place within our country. But what made it worse was that it was one of our guys who did it. It staggered us to think that an American citizen would do such a thing to his own countrymen. We all felt a deep sense of betrayal. The same is true of these school shootings: it's not just the horror of the crime – which is bad enough – but it's also the treachery involved. These people who are committing the violence are supposed to be on our side; but they're not. And with these kinds of cases happening more often, we're all getting the sense that even if we somehow managed to secure our borders from all the dangers out there, we will still have to contend with the homegrown threat.

And so it is also with the Church of God. The Church, by definition, is a body of people who are at odds with the world. The church's origin is from above. It's countercultural and opposed to anything born of this fallen earth. In fact, the biblical word that we translate "church" literally means "those who have been called out". We have been called out of the world by God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We've been called away from its evil influences that would entice us to sin. We've been called to reject the world's empty wisdom and its works righteous way of thinking. We've been called by the power of the Gospel to trust in Christ alone for our salvation, to believe that on the cross he suffered and died for our sin, to understand that in his resurrection he raises us to new life in the here and now, and to take up our crosses and follow him. And in this quest, we've been called to help each other: not to contend for glory among our brothers and sisters in the faith, as the disciples do in this morning's Gospel reading; but rather to serve one another in humility and love, and to struggle with each other against the dangers and threats posed by Satan, the world, and our own weak flesh.

So, in this sense the lines are clearly drawn. In the Church there is the light God's Word and everywhere else there's darkness. And we're used to this: in the Church our brothers and sisters in faith – our neighbors in Christ. Outside the community of faith are any number of enemies who seek to destroy us. And so, when we see various pundits ranting and raving against the Church and our faith in Christ, we're not surprised. The scientists who tell us our faith is a superstition, the sociologists who blame the world's ills on the suppression imposed by Christian morality, the worldly wise who tell us our faith is a crutch that prevents us from reaching our true potential, the philosophers who tell us we're fools ... okay, we're used to it. We expect it. We've got enemies out there. But what's more disturbing and in many ways far more dangerous are the threats that come from within.

That's what Jeremiah the prophet is dealing with in this morning's Old Testament lesson. He was a priest who was called to serve as God's prophet and spokesman during the tumultuous last days of the kingdom of Judah. It was a difficult time for the nation. Externally they were being used as the rope in a power struggle "tug of war" between the mighty Empire of Babylon on one side and the still strong nation of Egypt on the other. These two pagan superpowers kept contending for control of the region – so it was pretty easy to see who the enemy *out there* was.

Unfortunately, there were also plenty of enemies *at home* in the nation of Judah. These came in two main varieties. First, you had those who thought that for purposes of national security, it was best to cozy up with one of the superpowers, either Egypt or Babylon. In order to guarantee our peace and security, they said, we need to ally ourselves with one or the other. And of course, you had advocates for both sides: some saying Egypt and some favoring Babylon. The problem with both is that they wanted to trust in the power of men rather than in the power of God for their protection. The Lord had said, "Trust in me. I'll take care of you." But it was easier for many to trust in the power of armies that can be seen rather than the protection of a God who can't be seen. So, you had this kind of faithless insider. An even more menacing threat came in the second kind of homegrown enemy. These were the religious compromisers. I've mentioned before that the worship of the indigenous Canaanite's gods was always a problem for the Israelites. When they conquered the land in the days of Joshua, they failed to eradicate all the Canaanites and their idols as the Lord had told them. As a result, it wasn't long before many of God's people fell into the pagan practices – what with all the fertility rites and so on. I'll not go into that again. But what happened over time was that these pagan practices began to blend with the worship of the True God. Most people didn't see any conflict at all with worshipping the idol Baal and worshipping the Lord side by side. It got so bad that they actually put the pagan idols right in God's Temple in Jerusalem. There in the house of God they had quarters for both the male and female prostitutes of the Canaanite idols. This, of course, made the Lord furious. But most of the religious leaders didn't see any problem. The people were worshipping, they were happy, and hey, it was pretty easy and lucrative work for them. So don't rock the boat. They had fallen into what we call today a form of "gospel reductionism". It's the idea that God loves us so much that sin doesn't matter anymore.

In God's wisdom, it fell to Jeremiah to preach this unpopular message: "Repent and return to the exclusive worship of the One True God. Throw away the idols, cleanse both the Temple and your hearts, offer the sacrifices for sin, and let's rely on the Lord alone for our peace and security." To say the prophet had an uphill battle getting his point across would be a gross understatement. No one wanted to listen to him. "Oh, Jeremiah, there you go again: all that narrow minded, exclusive, 'no other gods' nonsense. Lay off it." The Lord told Jeremiah to ratchet up the rhetoric. Tell them, "Unless you repent and return to the Lord, he will bring swift and certain destruction upon the nation." To which the people responded, "You terrible hate-monger. Our God is a God of love. He would never do anything like that to us." They attempted to silence Jeremiah a number of times; but he persisted. It finally got to the point when the priests on his own division, his hometown neighbors, entered into a plot to murder him. "We'll shut this guy up for good", they told themselves.

That's the plot mentioned in this morning's text. The Lord told Jeremiah what they were up to, allowing him to escape the ambush they'd set for him. And part of what you hear in this reading is Jeremiah's deep feeling of betrayal. "I had no idea that my own neighbors, my coworkers in the Temple, were plotting to kill me. But thank the Lord, he revealed their evil plan to me." And let me suggest this: in warning Jeremiah of the homegrown threat, the Lord does the same for us. He's telling us, "It's there. It's dangerous. Watch out for it." And the truth is that some of this threat is pretty easy to spot. There are any number of so called Christian leaders and teachers that tell us that we need to rely on the wisdom and strength of men if the church is to survive in the modern age. We have to give up things like the belief in creation and the miracles and so on, these can't be accepted by the modern scientific mind; but now that we know better, we can tell which parts of the Bible are true and which parts we can reject as false. This, sad to say, is where most of the liberal church is today. "You can no longer trust God's Word; but don't worry: you can trust *us* to tell you what's true." And depending on where you go and who you listen to, you can find leaders in the church who would teach you to reject every basic article of the Christian faith – and by so doing, they are murdering souls and leading people to hell.

But again, such plots are fairly obvious. We know them when we see them; at least most of the time, anyway. Sometimes it takes a little work and investigation to get to the bottom of it. But even more threatening to the wellbeing and security of the Church are those we believe to be our friends and allies who are murdering fellow Christians through the siren song of Gospel reductionism and the less obvious sell out of compromise.

Maybe this illustration will help. Some months ago I caught a program on *The Learning Channel* called *The 750 Pound Man*. It was about this guy who was literally eating himself to death. As I recall the story, he was always a big eater. He weighed something over 300 pounds when he got married at around age 25. And mind you his large size had nothing to do with some kind of glandular disorder. He simply ate too much and exercised too little. Well anyway, over the next several years he continued to gain weight. When he hit about 450 lbs., one of his knees finally gave out. It just couldn't take the load. He dragged himself from the kitchen where he collapsed to the bedroom of his apartment, climbed into bed, and never walked again. Oh, his knee got fixed, but during his recovery he continued to gain weight while in bed. Between the added weight and the atrophy of his muscles from lying there several weeks, there was no way it would be safe for him to stand. And so that's where he stayed, in bed, for the next four or five years *while he put on yet another 300 pounds*. It got so bad that he could only lie on his left side because if he tried to roll over on his back, his huge stomach would crush his lungs and suffocate him. If you're a *Star Wars* fan, think Jabba the Hut – that's what the poor guy looked like. And I'm not saying that to be cruel; but to give you an accurate description. The truth is that you had to feel sorry for the guy, at least to some extent. On the other hand, you had to conclude that he was largely responsible for his condition. He was, after all, doing it to himself.

But he couldn't have got that way unless there were people helping him. Think about it: he couldn't go to the grocery store, nor could he even answer the door if he ordered out. No, what happened was his wife and sister kept bringing food to him – and we're not talking about normal portions of wholesome food, we're talking about super-sized bags of *Cheetos* and whole cartons of *Twinkies* – and *that* was only to snack on to hold him between the massive meals he ate. It was insane. Before she left for work in the morning, his wife would stack up beside his bed everything he needed to make lunch and supper for the two of them. He had a hot plate, all his utensils, even a little refrigerator right there, and he would lie in bed snacking and cooking all afternoon and have supper ready and waiting when she got home. How convenient, huh? That wasn't all: not surprisingly, he had a lot of health problems. Every couple weeks, the rescue squad would have to come take him to the local hospital for heart problems and what not. It took fifteen guys and a special ambulance to move him. Even the hospital had to get a lot of special equipment for dealing with him. It's not like a couple nurses could help him take a shower, you see. It was more like run him through the carwash.

Well, anyway, it comes to the point that the landlord evicts him and his wife because they're not paying the rent. He ends up in a special diet center, one of those hospitals that treat the morbidly obese—but strangely, even there they don't deal with the problem. At one point they show him listening impatiently to a dietician who's explaining what healthy eating is all about. She sets a salad and some crackers down in front of him, and he's like, "What's this?" "It's your lunch", she tells him, and this look of absolute incredulity falls across his face. He's thinking, "Maybe that's what the little green men on your planet eat, but I'm human and this is Earth." Finally, he says to her rather doubtfully, "Okay, I'll eat it; but I have to have my snacks too." And it turns out there's this whole closet near the head of his bed within his reach that's stuffed full of junk food that his family brought for him. The dietician weakly tries to explain that that isn't such a good idea; but he's not paying attention. Her idea of a snack is half an apple. His is two bags of corn chips and half a gallon of nacho cheese. Out of the room the dietician explains to the camera, "Well, this isn't a prison. We can't take all that food away from him." She goes on to explain that he eats because he has low self-esteem and if they say anything negative to him, it will only make matters worse. A few weeks later, the guy dies of toxic shock caused by infections from his massive bed sores. They show his family and the staff of the diet center standing around wondering how this terrible tragedy happened. And if you're watching this, you're sitting there thinking, "Can't you see it? He ate himself to death and every one of you helped him do it." They were all so afraid of offending him, of bruising his fragile self-image, of saying "no" to him that they became complicit in his death. They helped murder him. They didn't pull the trigger; they just handed him the loaded gun knowing what he would do with it. They were the enemies in his own home. Just an aside here (and no, I'm not making this up) but the next show to come on that evening was called *The One Thousand Pound Man*. I passed on it. I'd had enough.

The point, however, is that we see this same thing going on in the Church. When dealing with people, often times family members, who on account of their inherent weaknesses have fallen into some sin or other, rather than deal with the problem head on and risk offending them, we take the easy way out. We make concessions. We compromise. We load them up on theological junk food. "Oh, don't worry. God loves you and will never judge you harshly even though ... and you can fill in the blank here: you're cheating on your

spouse, living with someone outside of marriage, addicted to pornography, engaged in homosexuality, involved in unethical business practices, angry with your neighbor and refuse to forgive him, despising the means of grace by consistently avoiding God's word and the worship of the church ... we could add to this list all day. But here it is: when we fail to warn the sinner and call him to repent, and instead bring him false comfort and reinforce him in his sin, we are effectively bringing cheesecake to the 750 pound man. Pretending to be his friend and neighbor, we are actually helping to murder his eternal soul. There are times, you see, when we ourselves are the Church's homegrown threat.

And on account of it, it is to us that Jeremiah proclaims his unpopular message: "Repent of your sin and return to the exclusive worship of the One True God. Throw away your idols, your false beliefs in a god who does not condemn sin, cleanse both the Temple and your hearts, and trust in the sacrifice the Lord Jesus made for your sin when he died on the cross. And trusting also in his resurrection, let's let him lead us by his Spirit to new and holy life. Let's renounce our misguided ways and strive to help each other to walk on the path of true righteousness, lifting up the brother or sister who falls by the power of God's Word rather than giving them false comfort where they lie with the useless words of men." This world is full of enemies to our faith. They are all around us *out there*, and there's really not much we can do but defend ourselves from them. But by God's grace, there's plenty we can do in here. Let us therefore resolve, each one of us, to work on ourselves so that here at least we become a church without a homegrown threat from within. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!