**Jeremiah 28:1-9** June 28, 2020
**Matthew 10:40-42** Rev. David Pierce
***"Line Up for Peace"***

If this were the Prophet Jeremiah's sermon I think he might have only one two point to make: peace is hard. Peace is harder than war. Peace is harder than violence. Peace is harder than assault. When it comes to making things, it is harder to make peace than it is to just lash out. It is harder to make peace than it is just to pull a punch, or a knife, or a gun. It is harder to stand on a line than it is to stand on either side of a line, because a line is so thin, and one person standing on a line would be hard enough, let alone trying to get two people, or two gangs, or two armies, to stand on that same line at the same time…together. Peace is hard to come by. Much harder than war or violence. It is harder to make peace, getting harder by the day.

In his seminal book, *"The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations,"* Rabbi Jonathan Saks points out that one of the reasons peace may be so hard to come by is because it involves a profound crisis of identity. In the making of peace, the boundaries of self and other, friend and foe, must be redrawn. When we step to the line of peace—in the words of Cat Stevens, when we get on the "Peace Train" together—where now is the line between "us" and "them?" When two hands shake, when two bodies embrace, who is now the "us" and who the "them?"

This is not to say that peace asks us to disregard our differences, or to set aside our uniqueness as individuals. Indeed, the making of peace requires that we recognize the existence of more than one thing, and to acknowledge that we are not all the same, that we do have differences between us. There *is* an "us" and a "them," and only violence or war could eliminate this difference. But peace asks us to make room for this difference, while at the same time being careful not to favor some differences more than others. And this is why it is so much harder to pull off than war or violence.

This is why Jeremiah, speaking to a world thousands of years older than ours, said, "Listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. The prophets who

preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."

Jeremiah is standing in the middle of a world turned violent. His own people Israel have been living in exile in a foreign land for what feels like 3 lifetimes. On the day Babylon showed up, Jeremiah's native land became someone else's. They took his home, his temple, the blessing of his heritage, and the hope of his future. And they did it all in way one does if you want to make clear you can't have it back. They forced Jeremiah and most of his people to go and live elsewhere. Those who were allowed to stay behind became refugees in their own backyard, slaves to the new owners. What's more, Babylon put up their own sacred symbols all across the land—monumental reminders to Jeremiah that your world has been conquered by us and now belongs to us.

But now, says Jeremiah, things are about to change. A prophet named Hananiah has prophesied that in two years God is going to break the yoke of Babylon. Like that inescapable yoke that is placed across the backs and around the necks of oxen, forcing them to walk with their heads bent down, carrying the burden of work, work, work all the time, God is going to break the yoke of Babylon and set Israel free again. God is going to restore the people to the land, and the land to the people. No longer will people cry out for mercy and not be heard. No longer will the symbols of the earth be monuments of dominance, but the vessels will be put back into the Lord's house, the vessels which represent the justice and compassion of God for all the people.

And Jeremiah says, "Amen. Amen. Preach it Hananiah. Let the vessels come back, and let the people come back, and let them live free in the land once and for all. But listen up," he adds. "Mark my words: any old prophet can say that God is coming, and that the sign of God's coming will be famine and war. History is full of prophets who have used famine and war to try and convince us that God was on their side. But famine and war are easy. Anyone can withhold

bread and pick a side. But give me a prophet who prophesies peace, who says God is coming in peace, and then I'll believe you."

Because peace is harder. Which is not to say that war isn't. War comes at its own great cost. To country, to the soldier, and especially to the family of the soldier who never returns home, there is no question that war is hard. But in war there is no winner. There is a victor, and to the victor goes the spoils, but there is no winner. And so we must work for that which is harder than war. We must work for peace. We must risk the crisis of identity that comes with stepping onto the line.

But how do we do that? And what does that look like, because stepping to a line that promises a crisis of identity is a bit like going to the meat market to find only bread. Do we go hungry? Do we keep looking for meat? Or do we try the bread made by the butcher?

I will tell you that in recent weeks I have been trying to step my way to that line and to take the bread that I see being offered from the other side. In so doing, I have come to discover a few things. I have discovered that there is a difference between Auschwitz and the Confederacy. This may seem like an obvious point, but up until a few days ago, it wasn't so obvious to me, and when I heard people making the argument that we should leave Confederate monuments up as a testimony to our national history—as horrifying as it is has been in times and places—this made good sense to me. "After all," I heard someone say, "Germany hasn't torn down Auschwitz." But then I was reminded that unlike Auschwitz, confederate monuments don't stand as a testament to the horrors committed by one part of humanity against another part. To this day, I can't imagine there is any German who travels to Auschwitz as a way to celebrate the holocaust done there. And yet, this is why we have erected certain monuments throughout our land, and left them standing. To glorify and celebrate a time when a part of us as a country said slavery was not only okay, but God-ordained. To the degree that confederate monuments don't stand as memorials to the dead who died in slavery, they stand as tributes to those who fought for slavery. They are the symbols of Babylon at work in our world today, keeping our

black citizens in exile, as slaves still to their native land. That they must come down to clear the way to that line of peace is a matter of justice, to which some might say, "Amen. Amen."

And yet, we must heed the prophet's warning that those who act prideful, those who step to the line and puff their chests and pump their fists even in the name of righteousness, those who protest by condemning their enemies, do nothing for the cause of peace. They only run the risk of widening the line in order to push it further in the direction of their own side.

Instead, let us come to that line as an act of forgiveness. Let us acknowledge that in a world without forgiveness, evil leads to evil, harm to harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion, forgetfulness, or annihilation to break the chain. Forgiveness breaks the chain. As Rabbi Saks writes elsewhere, "Forgiveness introduces the unpredictability of grace. It represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do, but rather, it answers hate with a refusal to hate. Few more daring ideas have ever entered the human situation. Forgiveness means we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It means living with the past without being hostage to the past. It is the action that is not the reaction. It represents our ability to change course, to write a new narrative, full of unexpected possibilities."

Forgiveness is not the luxury of the moral, or the deference of the victimized. It is, and must be, the language of the privileged.

In our gospel lesson for today, which Joy read for us, Jesus has just called the twelve disciples to be his disciples. Boy, I wonder how it felt to get the call. Matthew to leave his tax booth, Peter and Andrew to leave their fishing boats, and Jesus tells them, I give you all authority to cast out demons and to heal every kind of sickness out there. Boy, they must have felt pretty good, hearing their name be called to step up to the line. All the gospels make a point of telling us there were just 12. Makes us think Jesus has in mind for himself not a big inclusive group but a small exclusive group. But then we get to the part of the story where we see just how big

things could get. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple…”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute Jesus. A cup of cold water to a little one? That’s it? That’s the standard? Little ones hardly ever even say thanks. Plus, you give them a cup of water, they spill it, you have to wipe it up, and they ask for more. A cup of water—anyone can share a cup of cold water. That’s greatness?”

“Exactly,” says Jesus. “Exactly.”