

# GIVING UP, GIVING IN, OR GIVING OUT?

Sermon, February 13, 2022

Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-9, 20:7-18

This is a message about giving, even though it is not Stewardship Sunday. The very essence of our faith is about giving; the core of the Gospel is the assertion *"For God so loved the world that He GAVE ..."* For that matter, the very essence of church leadership, as we ordain and install officers this morning, is about giving. Giving and serving ... the best leaders are the servant leaders, those who do and help and give and serve, unlike autocratic leaders who simply direct, criticize, take or "advise." I looked up "give" in the Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, which lists sixteen distinct definitions subdivided into some fifty-four categories! I thought about having a fifty-four point sermon this morning, but decided to just talk about three general ways we speak of giving: We speak of giving **up**, we speak of giving **in**, and we speak of giving **out**. By the way, that's not "giving out" as in "falling apart"... I know when something gives out in this sense, it collapses or otherwise falls apart ..., but giving out in the sense of generosity, sharing, giving of something to another. In our Scripture reading this morning, we read about a prophet who has been doggedly faithful to give *out* that which was given to him ever since he was first commissioned to service as a prophet. We read of a prophet who was never inclined to give *in* to the pressures about him to go with the flow of the majority. We also read of a prophet who sometimes reached the breaking point, at times he was just so tired of giving out, as he was so roundly and thoroughly persecuted and harassed for not giving in, that he was almost ready to give up ... but, he didn't.

Those being duly ordained and installed this morning are pledging to give out at least three years of faithful service to this church. Well, after being duly ordained and installed as a prophet by God, Jeremiah's term lasted a little longer than three years ... his career spanned close to fifty years, more than four decades, during the reigns of Judah's last five kings and beyond. We believe he was a young man of about twenty when called by God to prophetic office. He was a bit of a reluctant prophet, protesting, *"I can't speak, I'm just a child."* God replied, *"Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Go where I send you, say what I tell you, and don't be afraid"*. Then we read the Lord reached out His hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth: *"I have put my words in your mouth"* When we read the rest of this book we have to understand we are not reading the insights of Jeremiah with words that come out of his mind and mouth; his words are always prefaced by the classical prophetic formula, "declares the Lord," or "thus saith the Lord." To paraphrase, *"I touched your mouth; I'm putting My word in your mouth, so that when you speak. Jeremiah, you speak with nothing less than My authority. I'm going to appoint you to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant ... Jeremiah I want you to go to your culture and to all of the authority structures of your culture that have become so corrupt and to the temple' priests and professional prophets, to the palace of the king, and give out My words that will be on your mouth. And chapter one ends with God saying to his young prophet, "The kings, the officials the priests and people of the land will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."*

The bird's eye summary view of the next 52 chapters was nearly fifty years of Jeremiah doing just that, and perhaps needless to say, he was not often received well. But he did what he could to give out what he was given, hoping that some would hear, that some would take action and do something to change their ways before it was too late. He was one of the more colorful of the Old Testament prophets; God used some indelicate language through Jeremiah to get His points across. One quick example: In Jeremiah 3:3, God says to the people: *"You have the brazen look of a prostitute."* The RSV translates it, *"You have the forehead of a harlot."* What is meant by that? In short, it means the people have been doing wrong things for so long that they have apparently lost the capacity to blush. Nothing seems to embarrass or shame them anymore; nothing is too shocking for them! In Jeremiah 4, God says: *"My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* That, by the way, is what happens when people get good at doing evil ... we forget how to do good! Doing evil is not something we want to get good at! These people got so practiced at doing evil that they forget how to do good, and as a result, calamity is coming.

Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah had periods of deep and overwhelming depression as a result of this often hostile resistance; one such incident is recorded in chapter 20, the second part of this morning's reading. The context of chapter 20 is that Jeremiah had just endured a public beating which is believed to have consisted of at least thirty lashes with a rod. He also had just finished spending a day painfully doubled over in the stocks following that beating. Why was he so harshly treated? For giving out, speaking out, the words God had given him to speak. In fact, it was the chief priest of the temple who had Jeremiah roughed up! It's interesting to note that those harshest to Jeremiah were those who were ostensibly religious. And Jeremiah has just about had it, and he sort of has it out with God. He states *"Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived!"* Or as the New English Bible translation puts it, *"Thou hast duped me, and I have been Thy dupe."* Another translation has *"You*

*seduced me into this, Lord! I've done what you told me to do, and now I have become a laughingstock. Everybody mocks me, I'm continually, taunted, and now brutally beaten. I hurt all over, inside and out. I warn these people with Your words that their ways are leading to destruction, and I get nothing in reply but mocking and derision."*

It would seem Jeremiah was on the verge of giving up. However, he can't ... he finds himself driven to keep going. *"But if I say, 'I will not mention Him or speak any more in His name, His word is in my heart like a burning fire, a fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in; indeed, I cannot."* In spite all he endured, Jeremiah felt both impelled and compelled to go on. For Jeremiah, God's word was not the product of Jeremiah's own thinking or opinion, God's word was a *reality*. Jeremiah knows deep in his heart that what he is doing, what he is saying, is *right*; he feels it in his very bones. No matter what the world around him may be doing and/or believing, Jeremiah knows God is right, **He knows God is good**, He is ultimately and thoroughly good, and Jeremiah *can't* stop; he *can't* hold it in. He must continue to give it out.

Again, the birds-eye overview ... God told Jeremiah to tell the Judeans basically two things, primarily: (1) Violence and destruction, "terror and spoilage" (*as some translations have it*) were about to come upon Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, and (2) Violence and destruction, terror and spoilage *had already come* upon Judah ... at the hands of the *Judeans*. The Judeans were committing national suicide through their faithlessness. They were bringing upon themselves in ever-increasing measure their own destruction. They were tolerating the intolerable; spiritually and morally, their society was coming unglued; the Babylonians will only be coming in to finish the job. Jeremiah passionately believes this word from God, and Jeremiah passionately cares about these people to whom he gives this word ... but for the most part, they ridiculed him. And it broke his heart. The Weeping Prophet felt the pain of the verbal and physical abuse heaped upon him, and more than likely he ran the emotional gamut: He got mad. He wept. He got depressed. He probably felt out of step. He probably felt old before his time. He felt alone. He felt fear. He felt despair. He felt sick. He felt bitter. In this reading, he even curses the day he was born! Who could blame him for wanting to give up? However, Jeremiah kept going, he kept giving *out*, he remained faithful to the calling of God, because he was called by God.

He didn't give up.

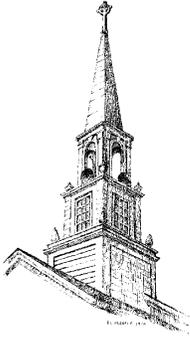
He didn't give up, nor did he ever give in ... going along with the culture around him. *"This is just the way it is now, Jeremiah, no sense trying to do anything about it."* We know that temptation to give in. In fact, I would venture to say all of us, myself included, have given in to some small degree or another; over the years we've slowly accepted more and more, we've compromised more and more, tolerating or even doing things we wouldn't have tolerated or done or even thought about a decade or two ago. If we're honest, we'll admit it takes an awful lot to shock us nowadays. The warning here is that Judah was being destroyed inwardly long before the Babylonians invaded. Jeremiah prophesied that violence and destruction were about to come upon Judah at the hands of the Babylonians; he also pointed out the Babylonians had a lot of help long before they would invade. Of all of the Biblical prophets, the weeping prophet is the most tragic; he not only saw judgment coming, he had to live through it himself; he was there when the Babylonians came and conquered.

Like Jeremiah, some of us may feel used up, even beaten up, some of us may have experienced ridicule or suffered subtle or not-so-subtle abuse for our convictions and beliefs. We are determined to live as God would have us live, to do what God would have us do, to be what God would have us be, but it's hard. At times it seems easier to give up, or give in, but let's let Jeremiah inspire us to keep on giving out.

To close, I'd like to read an excerpt from a letter to the session from six years ago, which followed a few years of intense congregational discussions about our denominational relations and whether we should stay or seek affiliation elsewhere. (*Full letter is attached; excerpt below. This letter was also copied in a 2016 issue of Fishermen's News*)

Presbyterians for Renewal posted an article by a PC(USA) pastor in California, which I quote in part: "We cannot leave merely because we're tired. Many times in Christian history issues of the greatest weight took decades, even centuries, to resolve. So we may say, 'Dear God, I've been part of the struggle for biblical faithfulness in sexual ethics for thirty years.' And God may say, 'Yes, and I want you to do it for another thirty years.'" Pastor Greene goes on to write that just because we may be more comfortable elsewhere, we cannot faithfully leave – not if God has called us to be here. We cannot leave merely because the church is unfaithful. Even that doesn't trump God's call. Pastor Greene writes, "Remember the prophets of old. I think especially of Jeremiah. He bore faithful witness to God's truth for a very long time, and for much of his ministry his message was met with hostility. One tradition has it that he was finally stoned to death by his own people, who got tired of listening to him. He was called by the sovereign God to bear long and faithful witness to an unfaithful people in a hostile environment. Today we revere the name of Jeremiah for his faithfulness."

Yes, we do revere the name of Jeremiah today because he never gave up, he never gave in and he was continually faithful to give out that which God had given him.



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The Rev. Dr. Stephen L. Clark, Pastor

January 20, 2016

Dear Session members,

This is a letter I've been meaning to write since at least last December, but the busyness of the season and the unexpected loss of my father put many things on back burners. Although many paragraphs and ideas have been "written" and re-written a thousand times in my head these past months, I have decided it's best to keep things simple and direct, as well as consistent with what I've spoken from the pulpit and written in correspondence, every word of which I still stand by.

It's perhaps best expressed in an excerpt from my November 5, 2006 sermon based on Ruth 1:

Some are asking, especially after the last General Assembly, 'Can we faithfully stay in the PCUSA?' Some Presbyterian congregations right here in Rhode Island are asking that question. However, that really is the wrong question. The question to ask is not, "Can we faithfully stay?" The question to ask is, "Can we faithfully leave?" Can we leave without breaking faith? The short answer: we have all made promises of fidelity and faithfulness when we joined the church ... so we really can't leave without breaking faith at some level. It's almost another sermon, but I'm just amazed at times by how lightly some people make and break promises, especially those made in the presence of God and His people.

The longer answer is that it is this question "Can we faithfully leave?" which enables us to adequately consider the possibility that God has called us to be where we are. As Presbyterians, we value the emphasis of our tradition on the sovereignty of God and the call of God. It is not an accident that we happen to be Presbyterian now, however that came to be. So, what if God has sovereignly called us to be where we are, as the faithful Mordecai said to his young cousin Esther, "for such a time as this"? If indeed that is the case, then we can only leave if we are clearly called away from our post by God. Until He clearly calls us away, I believe we are to stay put, to be a witness right where we are. If we leave where God has placed us, we take a huge risk ... the risk of removing ourselves from the place of God's blessing.

Presbyterians for Renewal posted an article by a PC(USA) pastor in California, which I quote in part: "We cannot leave merely because we're tired. Many times in Christian history issues of the greatest weight took decades, even centuries, to resolve. So we may say, 'Dear God, I've been part of the struggle for biblical faithfulness in sexual ethics for thirty years.' And God may say, 'Yes, and I want you to do it for another thirty years.'" Pastor Greene goes on to write that just because we may be more comfortable elsewhere, we cannot faithfully leave – not if God has called us to be here. We cannot leave merely because the church is unfaithful. Even that doesn't trump God's call. Pastor Greene writes, "Remember the prophets of old. I think especially of Jeremiah. He bore faithful witness to God's truth for a very long time, and for much of his ministry his message was met with hostility. One tradition has it that he was finally stoned to death by his own people, who got tired of listening to him. He was called by the sovereign God to bear long and faithful witness to an unfaithful people in a hostile environment. Today we revere the name of Jeremiah for his faithfulness."

I believe I've been called to be faithful to my ordination vows and stay put in this denomination until the day I am either kicked out OR personally compelled to sacrifice conscience and conviction. What I strongly believe to be the unfaithfulness of others does not *require* me to be unfaithful to promises I have made, although it can be argued that unfaithfulness of the other can release me from my obligations. While it isn't a perfect analogy, it can be biblically argued that unfaithfulness, abuse and/or abandonment are grounds *allowing* for divorce in marriage, however, such things do not *require* divorce. The faithful partner can *choose* to stay and try to make things work, although he/she is not *compelled* to do so.

Also, I have made inquiries to other denominations and their representatives; I'll include one such correspondence in the addendum ... as you can read, it is likely I would *not* be welcomed into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Nor would I be welcomed into the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) due to my beliefs regarding women in leadership, and for reasons too innumerable to explain in detail here, I am not yet convinced the new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO), is a viable and/or stable alternative for either me or our congregation.

Also attached is an article I shared with the Session in 2008 ("Embrace the Frog"), and have decided to re-embrace (pun intended) the convictions of that author. Again, I still stand by everything I have written (*a summary PDF packet will be included in this emailing for those who may not have access to it*), and will continue to press all I can to return our denomination to constitutional integrity and its rich theological heritage.

*Stephen L. Clark*

# Embrace the Frog

By Clay Allard

Presbyterian Outlook, Sept 1, 2008

For as long as I have been a pastor (almost 20 years), I have heard my evangelical brothers and sisters use as a paradigm for dealing with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the parable of the frog in water brought to a gradual boil.

Instead of jumping out, the frog adjusts to each small increase in temperature, until it is boiled to death. The lesson has always been that leaving the denomination is the only safe course, and that wise frogs leap out, they don't stay in.

For as long as I have been a pastor, I believe this is why at every new presbytery in which I have been examined, the statement has been made, either publicly or privately, that I would lead the congregation out of the denomination. The assumption has been made, not without evidence, that those who easily use the name of Jesus in the second person familiar are not in the denomination for the long haul.

It seems that too many of us are proving this assumption yet again in withdrawing further from participating in the part of the Body where Christ placed us. This sense of a need to escape — wise frogs leap — needs to be questioned. I was present, front and center, at the 218th General Assembly; I think I know just how hot the water is that we find ourselves in. But what I know tells me that escape is wrong.

I know that I have not broken my vows; I know that I knew who I was joining 20 years ago (one of the benefits to this slow-motion conflict). I will not break my vows. That is not a judgment on anyone else's actions — it is simply a statement of the fact of my conviction.

I know that I will not agree, no matter what the polls say or what governments do, that ordination without heed to the individual's practice of what the Bible calls sin is a good idea. I know this because I have experienced it first-hand, not because I fear homosexual people, or don't know any, or don't believe that God calls. The practice of calling sin virtue not only undermines the life of the leader proclaiming it, it also poisons the souls who follow who know the difference between sin and virtue, and leads them away not just from the leader or the congregation, but from the Lord. I cannot agree to do that again.

So, I sit in the boiling water, and think of three models: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In the midst of blazing fire that would reduce them to dust, they praised and sang — and emerged alive and well. Perhaps frogs wise in the ways of Jehovah do *not* leap. They sing Jehovah's praises in the midst of the death-dealing situation, heedless of the temperature.

There is too much I must break to leap — I cannot. I will not. If the boiling water kills me, let Jesus get the glory that my last words are words of praise and witness. If I emerge alive, it will only be because of Christ's protection.

Stay. Get involved. Embrace your inner frog, and sing God's praises for all you're worth.

*Clay Allard is pastor of Oak Cliff Church, Dallas, Texas.*