

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
June 22, 2008

Jeremiah 28:5-9 (New International Version)

5 Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD. 6 He said, "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. 7 Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: 8 From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. 9 But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true."

Ecclesiastes is not the most familiar book of the Bible. It seems to be the reflections of a mature Solomon, who recognized that many of our pursuits and efforts in life carry little lasting value. If you grew up in the sixties or are into oldies music, you might recognize a section of Ecclesiastes, for it was the basis of a song. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." Then follows a list of such times: "A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot," with the later verse, "A time to be silent and a time to speak." What Jeremiah faced fit that last phrase. We often meet the same kinds of situations. So we consider today

IT'S TIME TO SPEAK

- I. Speak out against error v5-6
- II. Speak up for God's truth v7-9

The days of Jeremiah were a time to speak out against error. They were difficult days for the people of Judah. Over a century earlier the northern tribes of Israel had been defeated and taken captive by the Assyrians. They never returned. More recently the Babylonian captivity of the Southern Kingdom had started. King Nebuchanezzar's forces had deported some of the population a dozen years earlier, including their king, Jehoiakim. A puppet ruler named Zedekiah was placed on the throne. Since then the Babylonians looted the temple of its articles and took another 10,000 people back to Babylon. God's prophet warned that total defeat and destruction of the city was coming. Their captivity would total seventy years. Jeremiah not only had been warning about what was to come, but he also advised them to surrender so that there would be less loss of life.

A false prophet by the name of Hananiah then rose up and contradicted Jeremiah. He promised an end to the captivity in a mere two years. The temple articles would be returned, he said, and all the people. Happy days would again prevail in the land. Good news, exactly what the people wanted to hear! But there was a danger in his message. When the false hopes it raised were unfulfilled, the people would begin to question God. Does He really love us? Is He trustworthy? Does God even exist? Hananiah ignored the need of his countrymen. God was permitting the time of captivity in order to purify His people and lead them to repentance for their worship of false gods. Hananiah was not encouraging anything of the sort. He would let them remain in sin and unbelief. His words were popular at the time but ignored the spiritual needs of the nation. He promised the easy way out and downplayed the seriousness of sin.

Jeremiah spoke out against the error of Hananiah. "Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the Lord." It was a public setting. "Are we not to begin privately in addressing sin?" you might ask. That is true when a brother wrongs you. However, public sin calls for a public rebuke so that people are not misled. Doing so here in the temple took courage from Jeremiah.

Yet he also dealt in a gentle manner. He agreed to the desirability of what Hananiah had announced. "Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon." He would like nothing better. Jeremiah loved God's people among whom he served and wanted good things for them. Yet

he loved God more and must be loyal to Him. He had to speak out against error. He could not mislead the people. Actually he told the way for them to be able to return, and that was by repenting.

Jeremiah's bold testimony came not from a feeling of self-assurance or arrogance. His confidence was based on his calling from the Lord and the certainty of God's message.

God calls us to speak out against error. Doing so is not popular. Toleration of all viewpoints is promoted. We recognize that people have a right to believe whatever they want. We can't force anyone to accept the truth, but we also don't commend falsehood or ignore what is wrong. Error may raise its head in false teaching that denies the one and only true God or the way of salvation through Jesus alone by grace and not by works. It is quite common to look to one's own efforts or achievements or character for confidence that all is right with God. Or we deny sin. We come up with excuses why we aren't really guilty or we think it's necessary to alter the message of God's law to keep up with the times. In other words, actions it forbids are no longer wrong if a lot of people have no problem with them. Sometimes what God calls sin is even viewed as virtuous.

A danger for those who love God's Word is to add our own ideas to what it says. We want to protect the truth and think we have to help God do so. The Jewish teachers did it. They added over 600 laws to God's commands. So in zeal for what is right we may say more than what God does or we deal legalistically with people. That is just as wrong as denying God's Word. A truth-and-a-half is no better than a half-truth.

We need to speak out against error in living. God wants His people to follow His Word. Lead holy lives according to it. We will admonish members of our families and brothers and sisters in the congregation who are straying into the ways of sin. All of us sin and must confess our wrongs. We live in daily repentance. If we continue in sin we endanger our soul, for deliberate sinning drives out faith. It's time to speak out against error, in love for God and in love for the souls who are trapped in it.

II.

At the same time that we oppose error we will speak up for God's truth. He has revealed the truth to us. Jeremiah pointed out that the Lord had previously sent prophets to proclaim His message. What had they said? "From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms." Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, and Amos had all warned that God would take action against many nations, including Israel and Judah. It went back further. Moses told of disaster that would come if God's people turned their backs on Him. Samuel had done likewise. God is consistent. He is unchangeable. Jeremiah's message fit with that of the early prophets, so when it came to Hananiah and him, guess who was correct. Something else to consider: if the message he spoke brought great difficulty for himself and was unpopular, wouldn't it have to be genuine? No one would deliberately bring troubles on himself.

What was the truth Jeremiah spoke up for? He called them to repent and turn from their evil ways. That's what God wanted. Admit you are wrong and come to Him for forgiveness. He readily grants it. Strive to fight sin and to remain loyal to the Lord. When the people were purified in their devotion to God, they would be permitted to return.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," observes an old proverb. Jeremiah stated, "The prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true." It would either happen or it would not. If it did not happen, the message was not from God, for the Lord does not lie and He makes no mistakes. The Bible calls for a further test. God is not satisfied to say, "Let's just wait and see what happens." The matter was too urgent. In the book of Deuteronomy we hear, "If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods,' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere." Some truth is not enough. All the truth is required as you speak up.

We speak up for God's truth despite opposition. In anger Hananiah broke the yoke that God had commanded Jeremiah to wear. Doing so made him appear like he was the powerful and dominant one.

Jeremiah did not fight him. Using physical might is not how the truth is asserted or defended. Soon, however, he returned with the sword of the Spirit, that is, with a message of God's Word. He foretold an even stronger yoke, a yoke of iron, as Nebuchanezzar ruled the world. Jeremiah also directed a personal message to Hananiah: he would die that year. Two months later he did. God is serious about His truth and its defense. He declares His will: "Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully."

He has a marvelous truth for us to tell. It is a message of peace, the peace of forgiveness. We tell how He sent Jesus, His own Son, to this earth as one of us. He lived a sinless life as our substitute. That perfection God has credited to us. Jesus died on the cross in payment for the sins of the world. He suffered for the faithlessness of Judah long ago as well as for the disloyalty, indifference, and arrogance of you and me today. Whatever we are guilty of (and it is a lot), Jesus paid for. Our record is clean in Him. Although we smear it daily, all is forgiven. Turn to Him in humble repentance and rejoice in the full and free message of peace. In the relief and joy of being rescued from the eternal consequences of sin, battle those sins and live to His glory. Express your love for Jesus in worship of the true God and by service in His kingdom. A vital aspect of serving is telling God's truth. Bring the same needed message to others.

It's time to speak, both against error (that's the message of God's law) and the good news of forgiveness (that's His gospel). To be prepared to do so, know the truth. Study and review God's Word. Rejoice in the hope and peace it brings you. When you are filled with and grounded in the truth, you will go and share it. You will stand firm and speak up for the truth. God promises to use the Word you share, not only to put down error and sin but to change hearts to trust Him as Savior. We fervently desire and pray for that outcome. Pray that He will use you. It's time to speak. May God bless us as we do so!