



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 8, 2006

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 11:18-20

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Jeremiah 11:18-20

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 31

Second Lesson: James 3:13-18

Gospel: Mark 9:30-37

God Tests the Heart and Mind

There are certain ways you can test various things to see if they are actually genuine. I have been told that if you want to test a diamond, take it and cut glass with it. If it is a real diamond, it will cut glass. It could be. I don't know. I've been told if you rub pearls over your teeth to see how they feel, and then you will know if they are real or not. I don't want to buy pearls based on my teeth. I'm not that good at it. But there are other things that you can scientifically test to find out whether or not it is actually genuine or actually real. But if I'm in New York City and I see genuine Rolex's on sale at the side of the road, I am probably not going to buy it.

But genuineness between people—that is a little bit more iffy isn't it? There is no scientific test you can put to someone to see if what they are saying to you is genuine or if they are trying to pull one over on you. We make assumptions. We deal with people on the basis of our feelings or our instincts as they talk with us or our experiences in the past with them. However, when it comes to the Lord, the Lord does test the genuineness of hearts and minds. When Jeremiah calls on God and says that God is the one who tests hearts and minds, the word for "test" literally means to determine the genuineness of. Now, does that comfort you or does that scare you? God knows the genuineness of your heart and your mind.

That is what we are going to think about this morning. He tests the hearts and minds and he tells us as we look at this example from the life of Jeremiah that he is checking to see the genuineness of faithful obedience and trusting or humble obedience as we take up our cross and follow him.

Jeremiah was a prophet. He lived during the end of the Kingdom of Judah before it was carried off into exile in Babylon. He served under various kings of Judah—some that were faithful—so in some of his writings that we read he talks about God's covenant—probably during the reform times when they were reestablishing God's covenant and focusing on doing what was right before the Lord. But he also served under some kings who had no use for the Lord. They put their trust in princes who made alliances with Egypt over and against the Syrians and it brought them nothing but problems and then later the Babylonians.

Jeremiah, when he was called by God to be a prophet, heard a message from God that probably sent a shiver up his spine. God told Jeremiah that these people were going to attack him and come at him time and time again. But God told Jeremiah that he was going to make him a bronze wall. He was not going to be overcome by them. How

would you like to hear from God that your life's work is going to be to be attacked, but don't worry because God will make you a bronze wall and you will be able to endure it all? It doesn't sound like a lot of fun, does it? And yet Jeremiah sought to serve his Lord faithfully and proclaimed the message that God had given to him—a message that said to the people, “You are going to taste the cup of God's wrath because you have turned away from God. Turn back to him so that this doesn't happen.” But the people didn't listen. In fact, as we read about Jeremiah 11, we are told in the verses right before this that the people that were plotting against him were the people of his own home town—people he had grown up with, people he had played in the streets with. Now they were plotting to kill him. Why?—because he had spoken God's Word faithfully. He had called sin “sin” and they didn't like it. They didn't want to hear that message so if they got rid of the messenger, they thought that would be the end of the problem. Kill the tree and its fruit—the fruit being the message he was speaking.

When we serve our God, there are going to be times when people are not going to like what we do. When we call sin “sin,” there are going to be times when people aren't going to be delighted to hear it. Yet in Jeremiah's case, we are told that God revealed to him a plot that was going to take his life. I don't know about you, but I have never been threatened where I thought my life was on the line because I was speaking God's Word to God's people. I have had people that have been very, very upset with me. There are times when I have been thankful that I was a larger man than they were because I think otherwise things might have gone differently, but I have never thought that someone was going to kill me. Things like this I suppose still do happen.

I remember my dad telling me the story of when he was serving as an elder in the congregation where I grew up and he went to visit a man who was out in the barn. He stopped at the house and he wasn't there, so he went out and found him in the barn. They talked about what they had to talk about and the man didn't like it. The man grabbed a pitch fork and started running at my father. My dad said he turned around, ran, got in the car and left. He said he thought if he would have fallen, he would have probably found the business end of that pitch fork. But I have never had that experience.

I have had the experience of, at various times in my life, not wanting to do what God has called me to do and not wanting to say what God has told me to say because I knew people weren't going to like it. Maybe you have had that experience where you know that God has put you in a situation where you should call sin “sin,” but you know the person isn't going to want to hear it and so you start talking about those Packers or that weather or whatever the case may be and change the subject because you are afraid. The devil gets in our ear and tells us, “It's not worth it. That is someone else's job. That is why you pay the pastor. That is why you have those other people. That is their job. That is not your job. It is not worth the friendship. It's not worth the relationship. It's not worth the problems that it is going to cause you.” But God says that we have all been called to teach and admonish one another in love. He has called all of us to speak his Word in truth, not just those who devote their life to the fulltime gospel ministry.

The fact of the matter is that when it comes to God testing our hearts in this situation for faithful obedience, I am betting you and I fail. We have failed in the past. We probably will fail in the future. And we have failed miserably. We haven't lived to serve our God perfectly. If he is going to test my heart and my mind, I'm in trouble and you're in trouble. We can make every excuse we want, but the fact of the matter is that when we don't do what God tells us to do, we are saying to God that we don't love him as much as we love our own comfort or whatever the case may be.

That is what kind of makes me shake my head in amazement when I see Jeremiah say, "*you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind*" (Jeremiah 11:20). He is calling on God to judge what he has been doing. How in the world can he do that? How in the world could you and I say to God, "God, judge me." We certainly can't do it on the basis of how we serve, but we can do it on the basis of how Jesus served in our place. He was perfect in our place also when it came to speaking God's Word faithfully, and at times it put him in danger so that he had to disappear from among the crowd. At times it caused him difficulty and eventually it led to his death. Yet he willingly was perfect in our place. He willingly carried our sins where you and I fail to serve God faithfully to the cross. He took them all away. He paid the punishment they deserve.

When you and I consider that, when you and I see what God has done for us, now we want to do what God has called us to do. As we consider how God has loved us with this intense love that has taken away our sins, that is what moves us to want to serve him faithfully to thank him for his gift of salvation, his gift of forgiveness, his gift of heaven—not because we have to or because we have been told to, but because we have a Savior who enables us to say, "Lord, test my heart and mind." Because when he tests our hearts and minds, he finds Jesus' perfection covering us, forgiving us and strengthening us so that we can serve in the future.

That is what he did for Jeremiah and that is what he does for us. That is why Jeremiah could then serve faithfully and also trustingly. Trusting God—not having to take things in his own hands, but trusting that God would do the right thing at the right time in the right way as God saw fit.

Here is the other phrase in this reading from Jeremiah 11 that just boggles my mind. When Jeremiah says, "*But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause*" (Jeremiah 11:20). I don't know about you, but I would be more inclined to say, "God, thanks for letting me know this. Now I want to let you watch **my** vengeance on them. I am going to get back at them because they want to kill me. God, you have to understand how I can lash out at them or I can act to take care of them and what they are seeking to do to me." I don't know that I would be so patient as to say, "Lord, let me see **your** vengeance on them." I would be much more inclined to implore the Lord to watch my vengeance take place and then sanction it and say it's okay.

Isn't that how we tend to be at times? Someone is plotting to kill me?—I can't even handle someone cutting me off when I am driving. How I am going to handle something like that? Think of all the things that lead to grudges between people at times. Think of all the things that we carry around what we are irritated and upset about. A lot of them

aren't that major. A lot of them are pretty minor and petty and yet, we are of such a nature that we have got to get even with that person. We have to have our way and we have to let them know that they can't step on us. I think there are many, many times in my life and in your life where we have fallen short of trusting that God would take care of things in his own way and in his own time. We have taken matters into our own hands. We have failed our God miserably because we didn't trust him and we think we have to act because either he is too slow to act or he has other things that he just isn't aware of what is going on in our lives. In either case, we have sinned against God. We deserve his punishment and we deserve his wrath. We might not think it is that big of a deal. How could God expect us to do any different?

God expects of us perfection. God expects of us holiness. That is what he demands of us. Just because we don't think it is that big of a deal, it's not like we killed someone, it's not as bad as what they were planning to do to us, and it doesn't matter. We have sinned. Once again, the only thing that covers our sins is the body and blood of Christ. All the times when we have fallen short, his perfection covers us. When we come to his altar and receive his very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, he washes away all the times that we were impatient, when we couldn't wait for him, when we couldn't trust in him, when we had to take matters into our own hands. Christ has forgiven them all and he longs for us to recline into his arms so he can say to us, "I am in charge. I will take care of you. I will see to it that you safely come into my kingdom."

That moves us once again to want to humbly serve our God and to trust him and to obey him—again, not because we have to, but to thank him that his life and his death has washed away our sins.

God can test our hearts and minds. We are not a fake Rolex. We are perfect in his eyes through the life and death of Jesus Christ. That is why we cling to Christ. That is why we grow in Christ. And that is why this morning we rejoice that we receive his very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.