

September 4, 2016 - 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. C)
Jeremiah 18:1-11/Luke 14:25-33/ Psalm 139
The Rev. Carenda Baker

In one of the first churches that I served as a United Methodist pastor, we invited guest musicians to come in the summertime to provide music for Sunday worship since the choir didn't sing during the summer.

One Sunday, Rich Burns, a man from a local neighboring town – an optometrist by profession and member of a local Lutheran church, shared a song he had written. It was titled "Willing Heart". It went like this:

"Once I stumbled in the darkness doing only as I pleased, and I wasn't really happy and my heart was not at ease. I just didn't have the willingness to follow God's commands, 'til I laid my heart completely in God's hands.

If you don't have a willing heart, ask God to give you one. If you can't seem to make a start, trust in God's power. For the Lord of love is watching you, He sees what you're going through, and He will make a way if you want him to, oh do you want him to? – then tell God so.

All the things my heart held onto only filled me with despair, and the road that I was traveling never took me anywhere. I just knew no satisfaction, 'til I found my rest in Him, then he filled my heart with gladness once again.

If you don't have a willing heart, ask God to give you one. If you can't seem to make a start trust in God's power. For the Lord of love is watching you, He sees what you're going through, and He will make a way if you want him to – oh, do you want him to? – then tell him so – He'd really like to know – tell Him so – you need God so."

For all of us on the journey of faith, willfulness and willingness is a dichotomy that we know very well. The familiar tug and pull between those two poles happens over and over and over again. That tug and pull between willfulness and willingness is at the center of today's Scripture reading from Jeremiah, and it is there in Jesus' tough words about the cost of discipleship from the gospel of Luke.

"Jeremiah's troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587, BCE, followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of all of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing." [Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*]. He experienced it all and wrote about it, from his unique vantage point as a prophet called by God, a proclaimer of God's word to God's people.

Today as we encounter Jeremiah in the Old Testament reading, he receives a kind of object lesson or parable about God's dealings with the people of Judah, the southernmost of the two kingdoms which had previously, before choosing to be ruled by

kings, been one united people of Israel – a people lead out of slavery in Egypt and forward to freedom and settlement in the Promised Land.

Jeremiah is summoned to make a trip to the potter's house to receive God's message for the people of Israel. So Jeremiah goes and watches for a while: watches the potter at work, how attentively he guides and lets the clay move through his hands, holding it just firmly enough to shape and mold it as it spins round and round on the wheel, skillfully crafting it into a useable vessel. Sometimes ridges and rough spots develop in the clay, or as it is being shaped it becomes lopsided – too thick or too thin on a side, and the potter lets it crumble and starts all over again to create a useable vessel.

The truth for the people of Israel is that they are just like that clay in the hands of their holy God. God has from the beginning been busily at work, shaping and molding them for Divine purposes. But they have not always been malleable and willing to be molded as God sees fit. Especially in times of crisis, they have felt abandoned and so have turned away from God. They have drifted away in trying times, even though God has promised to never give up on them. From their realistic and pragmatic vantage point, why try to remain faithful when doom is looming at the door and the bottom is about to fall out of everything, leaving them in chaos and confusion, having to somehow fend for themselves?

So it is a word of judgment that Jeremiah has for the people of Israel, but it is not judgment without hope. Turn around! Jeremiah says. It's not too late to get things back on track. God yearns for you, has good and wonderful things in store for you, and God is grieved that you have turned away. But there is still time, time for you to change, to come back to God and let God re-form you. You have not slipped out of the Divine Potter's hands. God is sovereign and you belong to God, but God will not force your loyalty and love – God will not go against your will. God desperately wants you to trust Him with your life and future, but YOU must choose to come back to God, turn away from the idols and pagan gods you are worshiping, so you can continue to be fashioned into the vessel God intends.

That tug and pull between willfulness and willingness is never so clear as it is in times of crisis. And always there is that question to be answered: will we trust God with our lives? Will God really be enough? I've heard that the word "crisis" in Chinese is made up of two different characters – one means danger, the other means opportunity. And that's right where the people of Israel are – smack in the middle of the impending decimation of their settled way of life, which will eventually lead to exile – their life, land, and liberty will be threatened and eventually lost. The danger they face is the temptation to totally give up on God who seems to have left them high and dry. Their actions have been saying "No – we can't entrust our lives and our future to God". Yet all the while, right out in front of them is the possibility for something different, an opportunity for re-formation, for transformation and a renewed life of faith. But the only way to embrace that opportunity for renewed life is to let go of their stubborn and prideful willfulness, turn around and sink willingly into the firm, faithful, loving and creative hands of the God of their liberation and salvation. Sadly, the word that comes

to Jeremiah is that the people will continue to say, "It's no use. We will go on with our own plans, living the way we have been – doom or no doom."

Willfulness and willingness. It's a dance as old as the life of humankind.

Some 600 years after Jeremiah, Jesus lays out for the disciples just how deep this crazy dance between willfulness and willingness runs between God and God's people. Jesus says, this decision affects every single aspect of your life – your precious relationships, your power, position, pleasures and possessions. If you sign on to follow me, says Jesus, you are agreeing to be molded, fashioned and shaped into a way of life that will require walking the way of the cross. That is, the way of self-emptying that sets self aside to share with me in embracing the suffering and brokenness of the world, for the sake of bringing God's healing and just love, God's kingdom.

So, says Jesus, I want this to be crystal clear for you. You need to be very prudent and count the cost of this choice. Because this is what you are signing on for if you choose to be a disciple, a learner who takes on my way of following and loving God and neighbor. You are signing on for dying to yourself and your own ways, in order to make room for something bigger, better, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine. But make no mistake – this way is very costly. The price tag is putting your life in God's hands – all of it. And there's no avoiding it: this will mean death. Death which will be transformed into new life, rich life, abundant and joyful life. Peaceful, just, healed and whole life. So the main question you have to answer, Jesus says is: Are you willing to trust me with your life? If yes, from here on out yours will be a life shaped by the cross. And we know now that means a life framed by death and resurrection.

As Christians, that really is the question we wake up to answer every day, isn't it? Will we trust Christ with our life? Franciscan Roman Catholic priest Richard Rohr says that mature spirituality is always about letting go. We have opportunities every day to choose whether we will offer up our willful hearts to be transformed into willing hearts - moving away from hands clutching tightly to life full of our own agendas, to the trusting place of hands and hearts releasing ourselves into the waiting and loving hands of God, the Divine Artisan who re-forms and transforms and heals all that we offer up to God in faith.

This is the way of life that we took on, signed up for at our baptism. And if you've ever wondered as an adult, especially if you were baptized as an infant or child – what in the world were my parents thinking to make such crazy impossible promises on my behalf? – you are in good company. Welcome to the way of discipleship, the way of learning how to live and love more willingly and less willfully, more God-focused and Spirit-directed. This is the path of the Jesus movement – from willfulness to willingness. Death to life. Brokenness to healing, wholeness, and salvation.

Protestant reformer Martin Luther said that baptism is a once and for all sacrament that takes your whole life to complete. As I get older, I find deeper and richer meaning in renewing my baptismal vows. It is necessary to be reminded often what I have signed

on for in becoming a disciple of Jesus. While there are precious of beauty and wonder, surprise and inspiration in the world, it is the communal practices of worship, prayer, study and service that help me to live out those baptismal promises I have claimed for myself. There is much to attract and distract and entice us to look for some less intense and demanding path. Dying to self? It's not normal, attractive, or natural. It is paradoxical – dying to live, giving up my false self to be shaped into a true and whole self, a vessel created to trust God, and through that trusting, reflect the love and goodness of God in which we are enveloped.

Christ our risen Lord, who in Jesus showed us what an open and undefended, willing and faithful heart looks like – the risen One meets us here today with healing and loving touch, and feeds us at the table as we receive Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. As we move through the liturgy, preparing to offer prayers of confession, healing, and thanksgiving in the Eucharist, I conclude this sermon with a paraphrase of the final portion of today's Psalm 139, as it is rendered in Nan Merrill's book, *Psalms for Praying*:

“O that You would vanquish my fears Beloved; O that ignorance and suffering would depart from me – My ego separates me from true abandonment, to surrendering myself into your Hands!

Yet are these not the very thorns that focus my thoughts upon You? Will I always need reminders to turn my face to You? I yearn to come to You in love, to learn from your mercy and wisdom!

Search me, O my Beloved, and know my heart! Try me and discern my thoughts! Help me to face the darkness within me; enlighten me, that I might radiate your Love and Light!”

May it be so. Amen.