Sunday, September 20, 1998
ONE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE
Jeremiah 8:18-19:1

Although I am usually a very positive person, during these past months I have been increasingly disheartened and distressed as I, along with you, have learned more and more about the inexcusable bad conduct of the President of the United States.

I have been feeling like Jeremiah in today's scripture reading when he is quoted as saying, "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. The harvest is ended, and we are not saved. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

Earlier, Jeremiah said, "They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed, they did not know how to blush." If President Clinton hasn't been blushing, many of us have as we read the Starr report.

While reading the prophet Jeremiah again this week, I thought of the Sunday School teacher who asked her students, "Which Bible story is your favorite?" And one young man answered quickly, "The one about the multitude that loafs and fishes." Jeremiah is one of my favorite prophets, but he didn't loaf and fish.

Before we look at the prophet Jeremiah and what I think he has to say to us as Christians, as we attempt to understand and deal with what is happening in the President's office, in Congress, and in the nation, here is what the sermon is not about. It is not about whether the President should be censured, resign, or be impeached. Congress and the President will deal with that. I trust the process that has been set in motion by our Constitution.

It is not about the President's sex life and his other sins. We already know enough about that.

It is not about what the daily opinion polls tell us. Frankly, I'm tired of hearing about the polls, and I'm not at all sure how to interpret them. I do know that our Christian faith tells us, as I said in last Sunday's sermon, that "what is popular is not always right and what is right is not always popular." Our government is not supposed to make its decisions by listening to opinion polls, but its decisions are to be made thoughtfully by our elected representatives who are guided by the Constitution and other laws.

This is a sermon about one Christian's response to what is taking place in our government and among us as citizens. It is a response based on a thoughtful study of the prophet Jeremiah and the teachings of Jesus.

A little background. Jeremiah lived in a time of transition. His nation, Israel, small and fragile, was being buffeted by surrounding nations. He advocated getting into no entangling alliances. He was afraid that his nation would be swallowed up by its aggressive neighbors. He was worried that his nation might lose its freedom.

What he had predicted happened. Israel was first made a puppet to the whims of other nations. Then they were conquered, and their leading citizens were swept off into what we now call "the Babylonian captivity." Jeremiah was put in prison because of his preaching.

The Hebrew people were pushed around by events and circumstances over which they felt they had no control. Their complaint was: we are not in charge of our own lives.

You know that feeling. A young man was complaining to his counselor, “All I ever do is try to please my mother. What mother wants, mother gets. I’m not in charge of my own life.”

A young woman was tired of working for others, so she went into business for herself. Later, a friend asked how it was to be her own boss. “I really don’t know,” she replied. “The city won’t let me park in front of my own store; tax people tell me how to keep my books; my banker tells me how much balance I must maintain; a supplier tells me what goods I can have; the union tells me who I can work, how, and when; and on top of all that, I just got married.”

In his own special way, Jeremiah felt that too. In his case, it was something very intimate and personal. He had wanted a normal life like many others — a wife and children, a place of respect in the community, and friends with whom to enjoy life. He felt denied of all this. He felt the call of God to be a prophet, to speak God’s word to his people, and when they would not pay attention, he felt all alone.

Turned away by others, this sensitive man turned increasingly inward. He searched within himself to discover who he was and even argued fiercely with God. He said at one point, “O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was naive enough to let you. You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. Because I have done your bidding — I am in derision daily, and everyone mocks me.” And then, with astonishing courage, Jeremiah said to God, “You are as uncertain as a seasonal mountain stream and as little to be trusted.”

If you’re like me, you too have had the experience of feeling that God is far away. Such moods are part of the spiritual journey when we take God seriously. Yet it is clear that Jeremiah felt safe in telling his complaints to God. He knew that God could handle it. But that’s not the end of the story, as we shall see.

While Jeremiah was down in the depths, he rediscovered his hunger for God. He wrote, “Even though I tell myself that I won’t think of God again, I find God’s word in my heart. It is a burning fire within my bones. I cannot fail to speak if God asks me. In the long run, I know God will abide, and I trust God.”

How is it that Jeremiah found the strength and the hope for the future while living in the midst of disheartening and distressing conditions? How could he be himself when the conditions around him and many of the people wanted him to be something else?

In another part of the prophet Jeremiah’s writings, we find the words that give us a clue. In the depths of his faith, Jeremiah heard God reassuring him, “Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the old one which they so often broke... And this is what I will do: I will put my law in their inward parts and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

He discovered he had more control than he at first thought. He could trust in God’s long-term purposes, or he could refuse to do so.

He interpreted God as saying to him, “Get rid of all that self-pity. Stop wallowing in what’s been done to you in the past. What I want you to do is to take charge of your own life. Stop blaming parents for what you are. Don’t let your government do your thinking for you. Don’t be a

prisoner to current events — that's all they are, current. Don't let yourself be consumed by the scandals around you."

Jeremiah found God's presence within himself, in the midst of his suffering — painful as that sometimes was — and it gave him the strength he needed and the hope for the future. It gave him the power to not be consumed by current affairs. And that's the advice he gave to his people as well. He said, "Don't let your exile stop you from living. You could be in Babylon for a long time. Build homes. Plant vineyards, marry and have children. Don't dwindle away."

He was also telling his people, as God tells us — there are no easy, simple answers that are going to solve all your problems. There is no balm in Gilead. Impeaching the President might be necessary, but that's not going to solve all our country's problems immediately. Nor will his resignation, nor his staying in office.

When Mother Teresa was still alive, she was quoted as saying, "You have to understand that the material poverty of the East pales next to the spiritual poverty of the West."

Taking into account the experience and words of Jeremiah and the teachings of Jesus, here then is how I, as a Christian, am responding to our country's present problems and especially the immoral conduct of the President.

I am not going to let myself be consumed with the day-to-day news of the scandal, with opinion polls, talk radio shows, newspaper columns, and the statements of politicians. This does not mean that I am not taking the situation seriously. Rather, it means that our country's problems and opportunities are larger than President Clinton's sins, as bad as they are. I also know that God is bigger than all of us.
Jeremiah reminded his people that God had not been defeated by the Babylonians, and we can be sure that God has not been defeated by the President's evil behavior. The people of Israel learned in their captivity that God was not powerless. Rather, they came to see God as one who opposed evil and injustice and yet does not abandon the people in spite of their faithlessness.

I am also going to continue to pray for the President of the United States, the Congress, and all others in authority.

The immoral conduct of the President can be used as a teachable opportunity. You can tell your children that not every person acts the same way as our President. He is the exception. That's why it makes the news.
You can also tell them that as they grow and mature, they will meet many temptations in life. All of us are tried, tested, and tempted. Some people take wrong paths and have to pay the consequences. There are right paths and wrong paths. The game of life is called "Truth or Consequences."

Behaviors — our conduct, both good and bad — have consequences, and those consequences are not just paid by us individually but paid by those who love and surround us and by the larger society as well. Not only President Clinton's family is affected by his bad behavior, but the whole country.

Knowing that, we can also resolve to reexamine our own lives and conduct so that our own integrity is strengthened. We can become more inner-directed rather than other-directed. As

Christians, we can resolve not to disappear into the bigger culture around us. We can get involved without being co-opted by the society around us.

Some weeks ago, my wife and I were in Russia, and we were there during a time of tremendous political instability. The ruble declined in value, and no one knew if the monetary system would endure. When we talked with Russian citizens, they, of course, were worried. The common people did not know whether they would be able to buy food the next week. Yet we also discovered an underlying hope. They said, in effect, “We Russians have survived the Czars, we survived Communism, and we will survive this.”
Then I thought about our own country. We survived the Civil War, World War I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Watergate, the assassination of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., and we’ll survive the sins and bad conduct of President Clinton, regardless of whether he resigns, is impeached, or censured.

That’s what Jeremiah discovered. And what did Jeremiah do? He bought a piece of land to demonstrate his faith in God and in the future. The Babylonian army was camped at the gates of Jerusalem. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before the city fell. Jeremiah was in prison because he was considered a traitor. Yet in the most detailed business transaction recorded in the Bible, Jeremiah buys a piece of land and has the deed duly witnessed and filed for posterity.

He is not simply speculating on land or picking up property at bargain prices. He takes this action as publicly as possible from within his prison, affirming to all that the future still matters despite what is going on around him. He hears God assuring him, “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

There was a small boy who, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, replied, “Possible.” When asked to explain his answer, he said, “Every day my mom tells me I’m impossible, so I want to be possible.”

Don’t we all? But that requires faith in God and the future, which puts self-pity and the hopelessness that goes with it aside. It demands that you and I look deep into our own souls and not forever depend on others to make us happy or give us our due.

As Christians, you and I can do this because, like Jeremiah, we know that in the long run, God will somehow bring things out right. But it’s not up to God alone. It requires that each one of us take charge of our own lives, live them, and make them count for something good. Amen.