

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13: 10-17

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Last week in my message I made a reference to a couple of news articles. One though has continued to stick with me ever since I first read it. It made me want to look up even more information. It was the article about the author Anne Rice and how she publically declared "Today I Quit Being a Christian." Now, I know this, not because I am Facebook friends with her, nor because I look at her webpage, not even because I'm a science fiction fan. No, I know that Anne Rice publicly proclaimed her departure from Christianity because It Was a National News Story.

In several interviews and news article, Anne Rice elaborated and as I read what she was saying, I think what she really means, as near as I can understand her reasoning, is that she is quitting being a member of organized Christianity. Now she was born and raised in the Roman Catholic denomination, but as an adult she declared her atheism. Her anti-god stance came out good and strong in her various vampire novels, or so I am told. In keeping with Full Disclosure, I have to declare that I have never read any of Anne Rice's vampire novels, I have never made it all the way through any of the vampire movies based on her books; I'm a "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" kind of a guy. And I don't want to get side-tracked on theology of that TV show, but the difference that I see between Anne Rice and "Buffy" is theology. In "Buffy" there is talk of God; there is talk of good versus evil, but back to Anne Rice.

As an adult, after she became a bestselling author, much later then did she reconnect with the Roman Catholic Church, or as she put it, she became a Christian, that was in 1998. She says she enjoys going to Mass, and she'll miss taking part in the Eucharist. She says that she might even return to a church to pray. That caused me to ponder this scenario: if a person says that they play golf, but they have stopped being a golfer and they've quit their membership at their club and canceled all their subscriptions to golf magazines, they don't play anymore foursomes, or take part in any tournaments, but if they still go and play on a public course and still goes and hits a bucket of balls down at the range, isn't that person still a golfer?

Now our own ELCA, our denomination, defines a Christian according to the ELCA webpage, a Christian is someone who "believe(s) in Jesus Christ and follows his teaching." So if a person says that they believe in Christ but are quitting Christianity, aren't they a little bit confused? Now I have to admit that Anne Rice in her statement made several points with which I agree. This is what she wrote on her Facebook page: "For those who care, and I understand if you don't" Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group.

For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else . . . In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen."

Now I have to say that I do believe that far too much pain and suffering and violence has been committed in the name of Christ. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials are the first three that spring to mind as I was going through this. You add to all of that the genocide of American Indian Culture that was committed in the name of Christ that was far too obvious to me during the years I lived out in South Dakota, or the hatefulness of the Westboro Baptist church as they picket the funerals of fallen military personnel, claiming that God killed that soldier because of the United States Constitution that allows gays and lesbians to be alive. Those evils are committed in the name of Christ. And I don't really want to associate with any of those folk because I am adamantly against what those organizations and people that I just mentioned endorse. And so I think what Anne Rice is striving to say is that she is against Organized Religion. She's quitting her denomination and Organized Religion, and Unsympathetic Religious Leaders are what our lessons tonight are about.

The people of Judah, and specifically those folks of Jerusalem, they consider themselves to be the "uber-believers" the wonderful, the epitome of all Jews, they thought that they were humanities gift to God. Judah was around long after the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians and those people from the northern kingdom, those ten tribes, they were taken away, they were absorbed into oblivion. The Assyrians after they had decimated the northern kingdom, they came out and they camped right outside the very gates of Jerusalem, but the city didn't fall, and so the people of Jerusalem said "HA!" God is with us. God's on our side, the Almighty is never going to let anything happen to Jerusalem. So they do their burnt offerings, and they hedge their bets a little bit too by offering things to the "other" gods, Ba'al and Ashereth. They worship Solomon's temple, yea I said they worship the temple, they worship in the temple, but they also tend to worship the temple, the building itself. They put on a great show about their religion. Just like so much of what the church does that Anne Rice dislikes. They put on the show and they forget the action.

Now later in the book, Jeremiah's message will be return, repent, the Lord God loves you, the Lord God wants you to be true believers so stop this garbage that you're doing now, but the people won't listen. Before he gets to that point though, Jeremiah first has to be called, and that's what we heard tonight. Like so many people throughout scriptures though, like so many of us, today Jeremiah doesn't want to take God up on that call. He comes up with a whole list of excuses, I'm too young, I don't know what to say, I'm afraid. Be quiet, says the Lord. You're not too you, don't be afraid, I will give you the words.

In our gospel reading, there's a woman crippled with some type of back ailment. We don't know what it is, maybe it's a slipped disc or a herniated vertebra, maybe

it's a spinal deformity, maybe she had an accident. We don't know. What we DO know though is this woman came to the synagogue to worship. She came there to learn. It doesn't say that she came to the synagogue Seeking to be healed, and she hasn't arrived (at least according to what we read in the scripture) because she's heard that Jesus is there and she is looking for him to lay his hands on her, but he does so anyway. Without her even asking, Jesus rests his hands on this woman and he says to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment," and she can walk straight. It is the religious leader who gets all bent out of shape, this is the Sabbath, this is the day of rest. Save your healing (that is to say, your work) save it for the other six days. Today is the day that we worship God, and this healing stuff is simply NOT part of God's worship. I can understand how a religious leader wants to protect his or her turf. I get that part, and maybe Jesus would have made fewer waves had he healed this woman outside of the synagogue, or the day before, or maybe a few hours later. That still doesn't excuse the religious leader for being more concerned about following the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law.

The law though and those that follow it is kind of what set Anne Rice off. She said in the interviews that a couple of things that were the final straw, first was Pope Benedict visiting in Africa, and declaring that condoms were not a good idea and would not help against the AIDS epidemic; then he stood up in Portugal said the most insidious evil facing the world today is same sex marriage; and finally in Arizona the public condemnation and excommunication by a bishop in Arizona of a nun who authorized a life saving abortion of a dying mother. In those cases, the religious leader was following the letter of the law. But what I believe is that God's will is not always in the letter of the law. Jeremiah attempted to get OUT of doing what God wanted him to by trying to claim the letter of the law. God wouldn't let him do it. Through all that happens, through all that happens to Jeremiah, through the call that God gives to him, through all of the head butting that he'll go through with the religious leaders of his day, and we'll hear about those over the next few weeks as we continue reading in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah will strive to remain faithful to his Lord and to his God. He'll tick off a lot of people. He does some pretty bizarre things, yet through it all he remains faithful. I can only hope that Anne Rice can do the same.

Amen.