

**A Tale of Two Jeremiahs**  
**May 24, 2008**  
**The United Church of Gainesville,**  
**Larry Reimer**

If any publicity is good publicity, then all the press about Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago must be gangbusters for the United Church of Christ. But what do we, who are part of the national denomination of the United Church of Christ, do or say about Rev. Wright? Do we exercise some critical judgment as we wish the evangelicals would do when their clergy step out of line? Do we affirm him and his ministry? Or do we say that all ministers get a little crazy sometimes and that shouldn't be held against their congregants? (See the "Non Sequitur" at the end of the sermon).

I want to look at Rev. Jeremiah Wright as he stands in the tradition of the biblical prophet Jeremiah. Biblical prophets are often difficult to listen to, and they typically get themselves and others into a lot of trouble. But being difficult and causing trouble are neither bad in and of themselves nor do they necessarily make one a prophet. It's been said that anyone who says, "Thus says the Lord" is either a prophet or delusional, and there are very few prophets. So what determines a true prophet?

First, a few words on the Bible's Jeremiah. This Jeremiah is known as one of the major prophets of the Bible, alongside Isaiah and Ezekiel. Prophets are not predictors or fortune tellers. Prophecy imagines a world other than the one we take for granted. Jane Kenyon said that the poet's job is "to tell the truth in such a beautiful way that people can't live without it, and prophets are poets." (Brueggemann, January 08, "Adventure in Emerging Christianity" at Epworth by the Sea, St. Simon's Island, Georgia.)

The prophet Jeremiah lived and wrote between 622-587 BCE in a world whose situation was remarkably similar to ours after 9-11. Israel had been a successful nation for two hundred years. But the world around it was changing, with neighboring Babylonia (ironically the site of present day Iraq) tipping the balance of power every day. Israel, meanwhile, was losing its core values. Israel believed it had been chosen by God and thus would always be protected by God, but it had forgotten to care for the poor, the needy, the widows and orphans. Israel had forgotten that its people were once strangers in a foreign land, so Israel was now mistreating its strangers and immigrants. Israel had forgotten it was once enslaved in Egypt, so Israel was now enslaving its own captives.

The prophets warned that if Israel continued this way, it would fall, as a nation. The typical prophetic word of judgment, whether from Isaiah, Amos, Micah, or Jeremiah is that God despises our sacred ceremonies, our elaborate rituals and our extravagant offerings when, at the same time, we ignore the oppressed and the needy. Prophets were not against worship and ritual. They railed against people coming to worship with the blood of the innocent on their hands and thinking this would please God.

The book of the prophet Jeremiah is a hard one to read. He calls Israel a whore, willing to abandon any principle and sleep with anyone who makes a new proposition. It's harsh prophetic language. I would be very careful reading it here.

Jeremiah tells Israel that it is not the one and only nation chosen by God. It may seem this way, and many chapters of the bible claim this, but Jeremiah challenges the idea that Israel will be protected by God no matter what it does. Jeremiah says that God has no consistently chosen people. The prophetic faith always asks the subversive question.

But prophets also always have a word of comfort and promise. Jeremiah tells the people that even though they have been as unfaithful as a promiscuous lover, if they change their ways and do justice, God will gather them again in love and healing. In essence Jeremiah says that even though you have played the whore, God will break God's own rules and welcome you back. Jeremiah says to listen to the hidden God who is troubling the waters. Jeremiah says to imagine a different world.

The prophet Jeremiah says, like John Dean said to the Nixon administration, "There's a cancer in your government." For his words, Jeremiah is arrested, thrown into the bottom of a cistern, a muddy pit, and left to die. His friends pull him out, and against his will take him out of Jerusalem to Egypt. Shortly thereafter, Israel is invaded. The king is forced to watch his sons killed and then he is blinded and exiled to Babylon along with 4,900 residents of Israel. The temple is destroyed.

But Jeremiah's message survives. His message is that God will sustain the people. One of the most beautiful passages of Jeremiah is the one we read as a responsive reading in the beginning of the service. God will put the law within their hearts, and everyone from the least to the greatest will know God. Even though the temple and the scrolls have been destroyed, God will bring them home again.

Israel in Jeremiah's time is like America after 9-11. We live in a state of anxiety, and we don't know what to do. Should we hate immigrants and people of other races more? Should we bomb more countries? Should we execute more people? Should we hate gay people and write discrimination against them into the state constitution?

And this brings us to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. The media presents him not as a prophet but rather as a delusional fanatic. This is done by using 30 second sound bites to describe his message,

So I go back to what we know about Wright? Who is he, where did he come from, and what is his message?

Perhaps one of the first things to know about Jeremiah Wright is that in era of the Vietnam War, when Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney were avoiding the draft, Jeremiah Wright enlisted in the Marines, and then became a Navy cardiopulmonary technician. He was on the medical team that performed President Lyndon Johnson's gall bladder surgery. (It should be noted

that after the surgery during President Johnson's time in recovery when Wright returned from getting a cup of coffee, still in his surgery scrubs, the FBI yanked his arm behind his back, spilling the scalding coffee on him and handcuffed him until the Secret Service said, "He's one of us." )

After his military service Wright went to the University of Chicago Divinity School, doing his theological work about the same time I did. He discovered James Cone's liberation theology which says that the God of the people who are riding the decks of the slave ship is not the God of the people who are riding underneath the decks as slaves. The God the slave owners ask to "Bless our Slaves" is not the same God as the slaves pray to "Release us from slavery." When you look at the bible from the perspective of the oppressed, by and for whom it was originally written, it takes on a different context.

I remember studying that same black liberation theology and questioning why it had to make Jesus black. Liberation theology points out that Jesus was certainly not the white man with blonde hair and blue eyes that European Christianity had adorned its cathedrals and art galleries with for 1,500 years. Liberation theology says that Judaism and Christianity came from the continent of Africa. The Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. They wandered the wilderness of Africa for forty years. They were touched by the blood of Africa. And according to America's definition of race, anyone who has a drop of black blood is black. No one, after all refers to Barack Obama as a white man with a black father. He's called a black man with a white mother. And thus liberation theology says we can see Jesus as a black man touched by Africa's blood.

With that theology, Jeremiah Wright became the pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. Under Wright, Trinity grew from 87 members when he arrived to become the largest congregation in the United Church of Christ, with 8,000 members. Trinity UCC distributes about \$300,000 a year to local people in need. Last year Trinity contributed \$1.2 million to national and international mission and ministry of the United Church of Christ. Trinity has helped start 20 new UCC congregations, including one in Gary, Indiana to which it has contributed \$100,000. Trinity is known for prison, health care, educational, and community ministries in the Chicago south side.

We ministers are taught in seminary that we are called to be both prophetic and pastoral in our ministry. Being prophetic means speaking truth to power, calling for justice, and imagining a different world. Being pastoral means being kind, comforting and caring to people in need. I remember William Sloane Coffin telling the story of a minister whose Board of Deacons was trying to vote him out of the church for speaking against the Vietnam War. The chair of the board said, "He held my wife's hand in the hours before her death, and my hand in the hours after. He's my pastor, whether I agree with his politics or not."

Is Jeremiah Wright a prophet or delusional? Jeremiah Wright has served his country. He has nurtured his church, and ministered to the south side of Chicago with service and financial commitment.

His language has been harsh. I wish he had not said "God damn America." I wish he had seemed to quote Malcolm X saying "The Chickens have come home to roost" after 9-11. But preaching in the African-American church whether it is calling its people to be faithful to Jesus or to social justice is forceful, dramatic, and impassioned. Every time I have heard one of these outrageous clips, I have gone back to the full text and found what I believe to be a true prophetic call in the tradition of solid biblical, prophetic, preaching.

In the sermon which he ended "God Damn America" he was pointing out that governments fail, but God does not. He listed the history of the failures of nations including America's massacre of Indians, enslavement of African Americans, internment of Japanese Americans, and America's failure to support the underclass in today's American cities. Jeremiah Wright calls us to put our faith in the God who transforms and transcends these failures, not a God who would bless America for its injustices this day.

In his sermon on the chickens coming home to roost, Wright explained he had seen the pain of 9-11. In fact he was in Newark on September 11, 2001 and saw the second plane hit the tower. What worried him was the way we were moving from a desire to right wrongs of 9-11 to a thirst for revenge against the innocents of other lands. He cited the terror we have heaped on the earth, the bombs we have dropped on innocent people for years and years and said that violence begets violence and terror begets terror. And he quoted not a radical black militant, but the white U.S. Ambassador Edward Peck, who was in the U.S. Foreign Service for 32 years and was the head of the U.S. mission to Iraq under President Jimmy Carter. It was Peck who said, on Fox News, that the chickens have come home to roost. We cannot expect to be immune from the violence we visit upon others.

Go to the following links with the unedited sermons of Jeremiah Wright and his interview with Bill Moyers.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqPUXjFYh38](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqPUXjFYh38)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbEzHdV24AU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbEzHdV24AU&feature=related)

[www.npr.org/blogs/news/2008/04/moyers\\_interview\\_with\\_rev\\_jere\\_1.html](http://www.npr.org/blogs/news/2008/04/moyers_interview_with_rev_jere_1.html)

Listen to Wright's sermons that have been excerpted out of context. I believe you are hearing true prophetic preaching.

I know that Wright has done great harm to himself and those around him in many of his most recent statements. But an ever-growing predominantly black church committed to social justice in the UCC is a remarkable phenomenon to behold, and I think its pastor might warrant our carrying his burden a second mile.

Look at the article "Pewless" by Martin Marty, one of Wright's professors at the University of Chicago Divinity School, attached at the end of this sermon. Most large churches preach a theology of prosperity and self-reward. Marty satirizes this practice in his church pew game where you move up if your pastor promises riches and happiness, and you head toward the door when your pastor preaches justice.

I find the last paragraph most poignant. "Would you walk out on the pastor who made you angry, forgetting how she visited your dying mother, greeted your children as friends and urged you to work for justice with mercy?"

I often wonder for myself, "What would you do if I sang out of tune, would you stand up and walk out on me?" If you wouldn't walk out on Sandy, Andy, or me if that happened, pause the next time someone attacks Jeremiah Wright in your presence, even if Wright has sung a bit out of tune, and stand up for him. All you have to say is "He's a pastor of my denomination." Remember that the purpose of the gospel is to distress the comfortable as well as to comfort the distressed.

The results of the media exploitation of Jeremiah Wright have been tragic. After Bill Moyers finished interviewing Jeremiah Wright on the PBS Frontline program, he said, "We are often exposed to the corroding acid of the politics of personal destruction, but I've never seen anything like this, the wrenching break between pastor and parishioner before our very eyes. Both men no doubt will carry the grief to their graves. All of us should hang our heads in shame for letting it come to this in America, where the gluttony of the nonstop media grinder consumes us all and prevents an honest conversation on race. It is the price we are paying for failing to heed the great historian Jacob Burckhardt who said, 'beware of the terrible simplifiers.'" (Quoted from PBS. Org, May 4 in The Christian Century, June 3, 2008).

And I add that the simplifiers are now those who as a political tactic take the best part of a person's life and use it against them. It happened in the 2000 presidential primary in South Carolina, where it was suggested that the child the McCain's brought home from Bangladesh near death, adopted, and raised was the product of an interracial affair by McCain. He lost the primary and left the race. It happened when John Kerry's Vietnam record was attacked in 2004. And now when the label that Obama was a Muslim wouldn't stick, they attack his church and his pastor. We saw the same thing happen two years ago when our own church member ran for judge. E-mails attacking this, his church were circulated throughout the district in which he was running.

Here we are, like the people of the bible Jeremiah's time, with a worsening economy, a war we cannot win and will not end that consumes our young men and women as well as those of Iraq, a planet whose resources and climate we continue to foul, a world population in need of the simplest food and shelter, and a nation at war with itself over religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

It is the prophet Jeremiah who asks, "The summer is over, the harvest is in and we are not saved. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

We too must have the courage to ask the prophet's questions and listen for the voice of God as we wait.

Let us pray:

Open your hearts in prayer to the prophets in our midst. Listen. Who are they? What are they saying? How do they call you?

Pray for the places where justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, and pray to roll and flow with these waters, to be an agent of justice...

Pray to God for ways to end the suffering of this war.

Pray for eyes to see the needs of those who hunger and thirst around our world, and pray to make our nation one that feeds the hungry and brings drink to the thirsty...

Pray the question of Jeremiah, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?"

And listen for God's answer in song.

Singing: "

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole,*

*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,*

*But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul a gain.*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul.*

### **Pewless-** by Martin E. Marty, Century contributing editor

This spring a certain Christian layperson has been criticized for not exiting his local church when he disagreed with something his pastor preached.

The experts on the subject have been, as far as I can tell, media personnel who never go to church, do not know what sermons are for, and have not experienced lively congregational participation; people who value fidelity very little and church hopping and sermon shopping very highly; those who have political stakes in their judgment; and people who pay no attention to the contexts of messages.

Less vocal are church members who are unsure when to advance toward the pulpit in appreciation, when to back away, or when to finally head for the door, slam it and shake the aisle-dust off their feet.

To help them, we offer this little gamelike guide, suggesting where they should sit in church to indicate affirmation or negation. Arrange your pieces on a hypothetical board and play along. Begin in your regular pew.

1. If the preacher offers the prosperity gospel, announces that you can serve both God and mammon, and uses as sermon text the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal:

*Move ten pews forward and up your pledge.*

2. If the preacher is not wearing a United States flag over her robe:

*Back up 15 pews.*

3. If the preacher avoids all controversial topics and lulls everyone to sleep:  
*No response—remember, you are asleep.*
4. If the preacher uses scripture to affirm that all acts by the United States military in all wars have been and are just:  
*Move forward ten pews and smile. This is getting good.*
5. If the proclaimer of the gospel announces good news to the poor, healing and hope:  
*Move up two pews, but tentatively. As a Christian, you should welcome that kind of message, as long as it is sufficiently vague.*
6. If the preacher blasts secular humanists, Islamofascists, rappers and anyone other than standard-brand heterosexuals:  
*Move up three pews and volunteer for the committee to extend your preacher's*
7. If the preacher finds that liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites and others, including himself, fall short of gospel-rooted living:  
*Stay where you are; ambiguity is confusing.*
8. If the preacher includes a few seconds of strident and edgy language that will make a controversial sound bite at the next congregational assembly:  
*Be sure you've recorded it; it will be good ammunition when you are drawing the conclusion that you've had it and don't really belong in this congregation. But stay where you are so you don't look suspicious.*
9. If the preacher asks those who are without guilt to pick up a stone to throw:  
*Head toward the back pew in a hurry.*
10. If a few angry words from the preacher can make you forget how she visited your dying mother, greeted your children as friends and urged you to work for justice with mercy:  
*By all means, leave. But admit it—you miss the community, the challenge and the gospel. It's lonely out here, and all you will hear of your former pastor from now on are sound bites.*