

# Wiser today than yesterday

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William Mc D Tully, Rector, at the eleven o'clock service, June 26, 2011, The Second Sunday after Pentecost. Based on Jeremiah 28:5-9; Matthew 10:40-42.*

On my shelf of books, with the great theological tomes and Biblical commentaries and devotional prayer books, I have a classic above all classics. It is Judith Viorst's book for children called, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Here is how it begins:

"I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning, I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day."

I love this book. It gives voice to the kind of frustration any of us can experience and often do.

Alexander's day doesn't get any better.

Someone else gets the seat next to the window in the carpool and he wanted it. At school the teacher liked another kid's drawing better than his. She said in counting he left out sixteen and he thought, "So what?" He fought with another kid who said, "I hope you sit on a tack." At lunch when they laid out all their food, guess whose mother forgot to put in the dessert? After school his mother took him to the dentist, who found a cavity and told him to come back next week. "Next week," Alexander said to himself, and not for the first time, I'm going to Australia." They had lima beans for dinner and he hates lima beans. He says, "There was kissing on TV and I hate kissing." In the bath he got soap in his eyes. "My mom," he said, "says there are some days are like that. Even in Australia."

Now, take my actual week.

On the one hand, I knew I would remain personally accountable and thus quite caught up in this chairs project. We very carefully planned for one solid year every detail of its implementation. We intended to roll it all out flawlessly during the week while most of you weren't here. Instead, I began the week by grinding my teeth over incomplete communication from the builders, and by railing against an unseen factory in China that delivered damaged fabric and slowed down the delivery of the completed chairs.

And then when I thought that was bad enough, our local telephone line provider—you know, the one with the famous name that even in this deregulated age owns and operates the infrastructure that all New York depends on (yes, that one)—failed us for the third time in a year. We were two and half days without Internet and email, and a day and a night without phones.

I resorted to working on my laptop and cell phone in Starbucks next door. Among other routine work, we were, by midweek, running up against a deadline of publishing the bulletin and insert. I needed to edit the words that you're reading in the insert about the chairs to accompany the grinding of teeth I was doing about the slow delivery of the chairs.

But the words I had written earlier in the week are words that we now store in a place they call the "cloud," a place in the digital ether where your words can live, but where, on a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, you can't get to them without an internet connection which was down.

So, I went to Starbucks and I grabbed the words out of the cloud. I edited them to reflect the teeth-grinding delay in the chair delivery, but then discovered that, of course, I could not send them from Starbucks to David Bryan, who cobbles together the insert, because he didn't have an internet connection.

I went and found an old fashioned compact disc, and copied the words on a disk. Somebody came over to Starbucks and picked them up and delivered them by hand to David's computer.

Then I went back to answer messages. During one phone call made from my now commandeered table in Starbuck's, the person on the other end of the land asked me, "Rev. Tully, what's going on in your office?"

I don't believe in whining. And in any case, my horrible, no good, very bad, week was just a series of minor disappointments—the kind of thing that most people on this planet would probably call "high class problems." Maybe your week was a little bit like that too.

The test when we're tested is what we do with what's testing us.

Ancient Israel had a class of extraordinary people called prophets. Their surviving

literature has given civilization some very high class whining that we can invoke when we are going through points of real catastrophe, and not just when we're having bad days.

"Come let us reason together," Isaiah told the people of Judah when they were faced with terror at their borders. And when the people wanted to return terror for terror he reminded them "If you refuse to listen you'll die by the sword." (Isaiah 1.18)

"Let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever rolling stream." That's what Amos, the prophet, said to the Israelites who were getting comfortable with wealth and lazily indifferent to the excluded. (Amos 5.24)

And then there is that first reading that we heard this morning. The thundering Jeremiah enters into a rather rational argument with a fellow prophet, Hannaniah. The issue was Hannaniah's overly sunny prediction that the exiles in Babylon would soon come home, bringing all their captured loot with them. Jeremiah insisted that only a clear-eyed look at their own failings—only an honest listing of the mistakes that got them into exile in the first place—would truly bring them home. And often, he argued, liberation comes not from within, or from the good efforts that we and our compatriots make, but from the outside—from forces we don't control, maybe even hostile ones.

On really horrible, very bad, no good days, to really handle things, to really change, to really bring justice, requires both inward honesty and outward help.

For Jeremiah, the help would come from the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar; and the ultimate return of the exiles from Babylon to their beloved Jerusalem, and even the financing to rebuild it would come from the terrorist, Cyrus of Persia.

Now while I was having my terrible, very bad days, a leap of justice happened in the State of New York when the legislature, did the right thing and enacted into law the right of same sex couples to marry in civil ceremonies.

Interestingly, if you followed the maneuverings in the capitol right through Friday night, the issue pretty much came down to religious matters and their impact on public policy.

People who never imagined that they would be prophets found, in the midst of that debate and in their own personal struggles with this matter, a way to teach us all a thing or two. The matters were religious, but the churches were not calling the tune. This was a civil matter, an argument after many years.

State Senator Mark Grisanti, who changed his mind, changed his vote and was one of the reasons the law passed, said this to his colleagues on the floor of the state Senate: "A man can be wiser today than yesterday, but there can be no respect for that man if he has failed to do his duty." I don't call him a prophet, and I'm sure he wouldn't call himself a prophet, but those are prophetic words.

Let's be mindful that we're not going to change overnight, even when things change for the better. As long as we remember that, we may be able to use change for the better.

Perhaps without knowing it, Senator Grisanti also captured the truth that prophets and people alike often, by the grace of God, stumble upon. *We can be wiser today than we were yesterday.*

The way we read the Bible here, the prophets remind us never to be too sunny and optimistic about the human dilemma. If life were just about continuous progress toward the good, we have the information and the capability to have long since built the kingdom of heaven on earth. But we haven't.

But the ministry of Jesus suggests that for all our honest admissions of our failure, real human maturity, any kind of idea of progress that would pass the spiritual test, that kind of progress always—and I mean always—results in deeper sympathy for our own kind.

Always—and I mean always— it leads to the imaginative leap toward justice and inclusion.

Always—and I do mean always—real personal growth comes to the truth that there can be no exiles in the human family.

When some of you, gay and straight, old and young, children and adults march down the avenue today behind the St. Bart's banner, you will be celebrating that truth.

Remember, Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." There's not a millimeter of distance between us. We are all children of the same God, all members of the same household. "Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

That is a truth that occasionally rises up in the flesh, in the people we know and love. And nothing—not even a terrible, horrible, very bad day can keep that truth down for long.