

JEREMIAH 18:1-11 or DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

PSALM 139:1-6, 13-18 or PSALM 1

PHILEMON 1:1-1:21

LUKE 14:25-33

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 4, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

### ***Molded Haters!***

**Hater! Nobody wants to be a hater! Nobody wants to be accused of being a hater! Haters suck! Hatred is never a good thing. No, hatred is a toxic cancer that bit by bit negatively affects the person who deeply harbors it in their heart and mind, slowly eating away at the individual it perversely poisons as they are consumed by its ravaging destruction. Hatred diminishes humanity on both a local and a global scale, at every level of society as a majority of citizens vainly swim against the tide, striving for peace against a prevailing current, seeking to create a world where civility reigns and rules. Sadly, even, perhaps especially now, hatred seems to be at an all time high, the rhetoric we hear daily detrimental to any hopeful prospects for peace and prosperity. Hatred has almost become a badge of honor among those who traffic in this despicable, detrimental, and deadly disease, marketing this poison as if it were a cottage industry. For many of us, even the word “hate” recalls dark images we would rather forget, would just as soon avoid or ignore. Hate brings to our minds dreadful ideas that trouble our souls and threaten to quench our spirits, as frail and fragile as either may be. And yet, right here in the middle of our Witness from the Gospels in Luke, the word “hate” stares back at us in all its ingloriously rough and raw edged ugliness, challenging all our sensibilities that we associate with the endearing qualities of divine and human goodness and grace, mercy and peace, the love of God revealed throughout the biblical narrative, laser focused within the Gospels, expressly illustrated in the life of Jesus. Once again, it is the human one, the man from Nazareth, rabbi extraordinaire, yes, he who was considered incarnate by the early Church and still regarded by many of the faithful today, yes, historically perceived to be the very embodiment, the personification, of God, it is the rabbi who is purported to have used this most incendiary, inflammatory word, credited, or perhaps better said, blamed with uttering this most divisive term. Teaching the crowds, whatever constitutes a crowd—two’s company, three’s a crowd—Jesus turns to the masses and poignantly declares for all to hear, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple!” He then adds for good measure, no doubt with a resounding affect, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple!” Yes, according to the Gospel writer you have to be a hater to follow Jesus! Who knew!**

In light of those harsh admonishments, just what in the name of belief and faith are we to think? Just what are we doing here? After all, I doubt any of us have literally followed this damnable assertion or frankly, have even given it a second thought, never taking this sordid salvo seriously! These words seem to just become nothing more than nonsensical, inconsistent, words, highly offensive as they definitely are, as they benignly roll off the page, blah, blah, blah! Time for a doubletake! Only when the preacher dares call attention to these vitriolic h-bombs are we forced to turn aside and see this great linguistic sight for what it is, seeing these inflammatory words in all their glory, exactly for what they appear to be, what they no doubt were and are, yes, exactly what they continue to be. Once again, our homiletical journey takes us on a tour of places we would rather not go, venues we would just as soon avoid or ignore, destinations fraught with what is obviously danger and damnation, making us swallow pills way to large for our shrinking esophagus, the pangs that always accompany human discomfort and distress, anxiety and fear. Let's face it, in our Bible reading we tend to go looking for good news, to gravitate toward the comforting stuff, all the while knowing it lies in wait in a biblical minefield, a landscape full of potholes and unsuitable terrain, the worst of verbal conditions, nothing like the comforting words we often choose to read when we dare pick up a Bible. It is the proverbial rose with thorns, cherries with pits! Yes, all together it adds up to a bit of *deja vu*, here we go again!

I am often fascinated and amazed when I hear preachers and teachers turn the gospel of Jesus into fluff, a lightweight exercise, yes, leaning into the images that are indeed biblically present, images such as an easy yoke and a light burden, trying in vain to forget that this is only part of the picture, maybe one half of the larger story. It can be so tempting, so easy, to dismiss or pretend the oft judgmental warnings do not exist, avoiding or ignoring, if at all possible, the impossible demands clearly revealed within much of the biblical narrative. Those who pick and choose, who choose to proof text any text when reading the Bible, do so at their own risk, their own peril. The Bible must be read as a whole, or it must not be read at all! It would be better to never pick it up off the table than to give it the short shrift that many are prone to do. The biblical narrative is full of polarities, contradictions, complexities, discrepancies, difficulties, a whole host of challenging ideas and competing images, concepts that continue to blow our mind even as they did when they were first discovered or read by the ancients. Today's textual example is another instance reminding those who read the Bible that if we take this stuff literally, we do so at our own naive interpretive ignorance, our own failure to grasp the nuance, the subtleties in any given biblical text, to comprehend in a necessarily comprehensive way. Even so, failure to take these words seriously means that we inevitably miss the mark and the message in our presumptive goal of seeking to follow the man from Nazareth, emulating his holy way, even knowing we will never come close to the call he put before his disciples then and continues to urge in his followers now. Yes, it is a balancing act, a nearly impossible walk on a tightrope, but an exercise that cannot be one of futility, but must

be one of at least a modicum of success. We aim high and fall low! We miss the mark, short of our target, the goal of our commitment to his way or the highway! Even so, grace makes up all the difference, forgiveness the way of God, delightfully closing what is a very large gap, what appears to be a great gulf fixed, a chasm on steroids.

**Once again, as I often state in my preaching, it is important to briefly remind ourselves that Jesus said very little of the quotes attributed to him in the Gospels. We have learned through a variety of source criticisms and similar methodologies along with other linguistic techniques that most of the words credited to his lips were but faint voices, resounding echoes, verbal musings, creatively crafted by the agenda-oriented early first-century Church as they lived out their joyful and miserable existence on the dark and bright side of Jesus' death, all ironies fully in play. The climate in which they lived and moved and had their being, as you will recall, was one of murder and mayhem, madness and martyrdom, many of Jesus' followers put to death at the hands of their Roman adversaries while at the same time enduring the pangs of separation anxiety, a painful awareness, that came with the shock of their sudden expulsion from the synagogues and temple, no longer worthy to be called traditional Jews, temporarily homeless as an out sectarian religious group, an unwelcome mutation of the faith of their forebears. Jesus' followers, soon to be known as Christians, had crossed a not-so-imaginary line and there was no going back. Once again, these painful dynamics created the ultimate family feud, a civil war of religious magnitude. When preaching these lessons it is very easy to sound like the proverbial broken record, a repetitive refrain that seems to have no end, redundancy a recurring reality! As we read these words loaded with the tension of the day, we clearly see the agenda, the purpose, of these harsh statements hooked onto Jesus for the time being and for all time. Yes, as with that brutally honest assessment advocating divisiveness while wielding a peace-killing sword in our reading from Luke a couple of weeks ago, once again we are forced to ponder the animosity that was taking place within the family of faith, this once tightknit community, yes a schism, a permanent split within families and among friends, a bitter divorce that throughout history has disastrously spawned a palpable and irrational level of hate, yes, has unfortunately had seemingly eternal consequences pitting the faith of old against the faith of new, Judaism versus Christianity, a most unfortunate residual between these two faiths who have their origin in the Abrahamic tradition, the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So yes, there were rifts between fathers and mothers, wives and children, brothers and sisters, and every other imaginable familial and friendship formed relationship. The writers even add for affect that those who would dare follow Jesus would have to despise, to hate, life itself! Why? The odds were that if you dared to have the moxie to proclaim the name of Jesus, that if you bravely gave your witness, boldly and courageously declared your unyielding and undying testimony, that you would become a target, killed right there on the spot if not soon thereafter, yes, DRT, dead right there! Death was often the only satisfactory solution, the only way out for many who would rather die, who would rather choose a martyr's death, succumbing at the hands of the sword rather than even**

remotely deny their sworn allegiance, their fealty, their steadfast fidelity, to the one who had changed their life for the better and forever. There was never even a question about their commitment, no debate whatsoever! No pause to ponder or wonder about their determination to stay the difficult course! More than 2000 years later I am still amazed at the resolve of these steadfastly faithful Jesus followers who exuded the strongest mettle and intestinal fortitude, their faith without reservation, never called into question, never wavering, never waffling. **With all these dizzying dynamics swirling about them, there had to be at least a modicum of doubt somewhere in the back of their minds! Surely! And not only that, but there had to be at least a hint, a modicum of anger, righteous and justified as it would have been, an anger that yes, fueled understandable feelings of rage and, yes, even hate! After all, faithful as they were, they were human!** In fairness to all of us who live our lives of faith in relative if not total ease, giving ourselves a much-needed break here, if we are honest with ourselves, we would quickly acknowledge just how easy we have got it, while also acknowledging the difficulty, the near impossibility of walking in the footsteps of our faithful forebears, a dead-end journey that constituted a very real death march.

Thanks to the mysterious machinations of the magical, mystical, lectionary editors, who for reasons known and unknown, did their careful pairing of the four texts for each Sunday in years A, B, and C, we read today's striking words from Luke's Gospel against the backdrop of the musings of the prophet Jeremiah. These prophetic words form some of what we found to be Jeremiah's more familiar and favorite prophecy, the story of the potter at the wheel, a text that gave birth to the popular Gospel Song, "Have Thine Own Way!" Presumably Jeremiah is instructed by the Lord to go down to the potter's house and observe what is normally a most routine, ordinary, event, the turning of clay into fire baked pottery for all its multipurpose uses. I wonder what was going through Jeremiah's mind as he followed these careful, but somewhat benign, perhaps even a bit strange, instructions. Surely, he must have thought to himself that there would be nothing to see here, nothing of significance much less lasting value, nothing of the kind of import befitting God's number one prophet, nothing to share! Jeremiah watches intently the proceedings taking place in front of him, the potter so fixed and focused on his task at hand that he does not even notice Jeremiah's larger than life presence. Intensively focused, the prophet takes in everything he sees, hoping, perhaps even knowing that at some point some meaning will surely come into focus, something tangible emerging from the potter's hands, resonating within this prophetically intuitive soul, something will stand out from all this repetitive motion rapidly rotating in front of Jeremiah's watchful eyes. And just when it appears that there is nothing here to see, nothing to glean from this ancient craft, an artform for the ages—boom—the potter smashes what appears to be a perfectly good piece of pottery back into its shapeless form, ready to begin the process anew. Yes, only in the eyes of the potter there was an obvious flaw, a fly in the ointment, a possible perhaps, spoiled and soiled from what must be birthed as a perfect product, no corrections or temporary fixes possible. And in an instant, it all suddenly comes rushing clearly,

transparently, in Jeremiah's hyper-focused mind, a word from the Lord springing forth from the stone silence reverberating like the noisiest of the apostle Paul's loud gong or clanging symbol, the first century version of The Gong Show! "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel!" This sobering question then followed by some painfully detailed divine commentary!

The irony of this text is that in actuality, in its original form, as it was first written, and thus, of course, its current form, Jeremiah's recollections portray what was and is indeed a completely and totally negative and condemnatory narrative. No doubt, for a variety of reasons, we have recreated it in the way we would like for it to read, a natural inclination, easily turning these convicting, condemnatory words into the most positive of imagery possible, hence serving as pabulum for positive preaching and teaching, and yes, songs like "Have Thine Own Way!" And today, I will also be guilty as charged, but I am at least willing to honestly admit to doing so, to acknowledge the discrepancy, the dichotomy between the radical polarities of the reality of what the text actually says versus fiction, the way we would devotionally write and interpret it, as we ponder some implications for our lives from this richest reading from the Hebrew Bible. Throughout our lives we are constantly being molded and remade, hopefully evolving as we go, continuing to grow and mature as we day by day become our truest, authentic, genuine selves, striving to become the best human beings we can be. Scientists have spent a lot of time and energy and money seeking to determine the various ways we are influenced, events and environment, including of course the persuasive value of other people, cajoling, guiding, and nudging, especially mentors and role models within our sphere of being and influence, all combined serving to change and shape who we are and are becoming. It is an ongoing process that has no end, various stimuli affecting us even and up until we breathe our last. What we painfully learn as human creatures is, that despite believing ourselves to be created in the divine image, embracing a spark of divinity deeply embedded in our spirits, imbued in our very souls, we know full well that our lives can go in a myriad of directions, some good, some bad, and some ugly. We begin as a clean slate, a blank canvas! We are creatures of both habit and free will! As the epistle writer of I John (3:2) astutely observes, "Beloved, we are God's children now! What we will be has not yet been revealed! What we do know is this: when (Christ) is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is!" I am reminded from a line from an old Bill and Gloria Gaither song, "I'm not what I want to be, I'm not what I'm gonna be, but thank God I'm not what I was!" You will probably here another Gaither reference in about ten years! We are never static, but always growing, always moving! It is in our very DNA! In the meantime, we make it up as we go, walking by faith and not by sight when we can, when we are able, when we allow, trustingly going forth by the grace of God! In our human being and doing, yes, we have seen it all in terms of our collective behavior, every manifestation exercised in toto by humanity, yes, from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the very best to the very worst, yes, and everything in between.

I am always fascinated at the way we become who and what we become! It is a reminder that all of life really is a crap shoot, much like the proverbial box of chocolates, a living and breathing landscape full of twists and turns, forks in the roads, options and opportunities abounding! As I went about the task of preparing this sermon, I was reminded of the groundbreaking psychological work of the late James Fowler of Emory University in Atlanta who wrote the classic and comprehensive developmental study on faith formation, faith development, called *The Stages of Faith*. Fowler begins at ground zero, what he calls "Stage 0" and tracks the growth of an individual through seven stages, ending with "Stage 6", a journey that includes all the various experiences commensurate with specific age groups that characterize our being and doing throughout our aging and maturation process. I guess these dynamics even include the pitfalls that come with whatever forms of arrested development plague some individuals in their failure to launch. It comes as no surprise that during the early developmental years, opinions are formed, beliefs and values developed, and so very much of it determined by parental and other major influencers, environment being a key ingredient to who and what we become. I was also reminded of the practical aspects of my research in biblical hospitality. A major assignment in my hope-to-be accepted dissertation was to interview a minimum of twenty clergy from four denominational bodies who pastor "Open and Affirming," or "Welcoming and Affirming" local missional churches. They were given fourteen specific questions. It will come as no surprise to any of you that there was very little crossover, that those who were reared in open and progressive congregations, those who grew up in unapologetically welcoming and inclusive churches, carried that broad ecclesiological and theological perspective with them into adulthood. Their liberal leanings and progressive viewpoints remained as a major part, a vital aspect, of their identity straight through their seminary experience. These guideposts then transitioned seamlessly into their pastoral vocations in churches that were either already on board or were open to consider the possibility of becoming what the United Church of Christ calls "extravagantly welcoming." While it was beyond the purview of the research to interview conservative or fundamentalist pastors, knowing full well their strong and inflexibly formed opinions regarding the Bible and the Church and the LGBTQQIA+ community, it is certain that those who grew up in the narrow confines of such an insular sectarian environment would typically continue to hold to those restrictive and subsequently oft abusive viewpoints. Sidebar: environment, however, never translates in terms of biological diversity in terms of sexuality, an argument that many who believe that non-heterosexual persons can be deprogrammed buy into exclusively. Sexuality is all about science! It is all about biology, not theology! That being said, however, environment weighs heavily into the human equation when it comes to our mores, our ethics and morals, our values, our beliefs and all the opinions that inform and impact, yes, that nurture and nourish our faith. Yes, the way we are molded, influenced, those who serve as mentors and guides, role models, heavily serve to construct our being and doing. As science has shown, many

**abuse victims and survivors subsequently become abusers as well. Hate breeds bitterness, discontent, and eventually and often inevitably more hate!**

**What I am trying to convey is that hatred, as with many defining human characteristics creating our beautiful human diversity, a wonderful tapestry, can be passed down from generation to generation, a stark reminder we confront in the third commandment (Exodus 20:5-6) which states unequivocally that God is jealous, “punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, (but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”) Ouch! Wow, imagine that! Talk about unfair! Yes, a sobering reminder that history indeed repeats itself! What goes around comes around again and again and again!**

**Every day that I have the blessed privilege, the wonderful opportunity to live and take a breath I am grateful that I became a proud outlier, the exception to a reality that is almost a rule. Much of my life has been devoted, perhaps consumed, to deconstructing, demythologizing, vast amounts of toxic information that initially informed and impacted my development as I evolved from who I once was. As you are now aware, I rarely engage much confessional preaching but I thought my story might be relevant and helpful. So, I may be asking forgiveness and not permission! I grew up in a very racist environment along with a very conservative to fundamentalist Christian perspective, the congregation that baptized me moving further to the right during my early and still very impressionable college years. I was also supposed to be a daughter named Kathryn and called “Kitty,” my mother convinced beyond all rationality that she would give birth to a girl. That, my friends, is why I am named after the late ukulele player Tiny Tim, a name my dad dared threaten to give if my mother would not choose a boy’s name during her pregnancy. Don’t call me “Tiny!” I say this because my mother during my early childhood vainly attempted to raise me as the daughter she never had. Yes, this probably explains a lot! Ya’ll are getting the picture. I often joke that I have made a good living off of a severe personality disorder! If environment could persuade gender affiliation or sexuality, I would be playing for another team, if you get my drift! Despite those significant influences and influencers, by the grace of God I was able to extract myself from my racist past, putting racism in all its ugly forms to bed, as far behind in the rearview mirror as is humanly possible. I was also able to jettison my narrow and sectarian ecclesiology and theology that no longer suited my progressive leanings, that no longer fit my postmodern predilections, my twenty-first century, space age, scientifically predisposed proclivities. I say all this to say that the way we are raised, all the myriad factors in our developmental processes, go a long way to forming and framing who we eventually and inevitably become, knowing that we never fully evolve, never learning all there is to learn in this abundantly overflowing life. And this multifaceted paradigm describes perfectly the way it once was for our forebears in the faith as we read their varied and mixed reflections.**

In his speech to the nation this past Thursday night, President Joe Biden declared that in this country, these United States of America, that “hate has no safe harbor!” The followers of Jesus of whom we read, not only in the Book of Acts and the Epistles, but also a story hidden in the Gospels masquerading or under the guise of Jesus, were understandably angry because of a variety of circumstances, situations beyond their control. They had been kicked out of their family of faith and were now relentlessly hunted like animals by their Roman pursuers. Life was challenging almost beyond belief! Their faith was tested and tried in every imaginable way, doubt no doubt always nipping at their heels, those loud and demonstrative, uncertain voices echoing in their heads questioning their conversion decision along with every other choice they had soberly made, every resulting factor that dictated their reality in real time. It is no wonder, knowing their backstory, words explicitly found in the Gospels of all places, where we surprisingly, yes, shockingly, read that hate is not only acceptable, but is an admirable expectation, a requirement, for those who dare have the audacity to take up anything even remotely similar to Jesus’ cross, ready and willing to die for the cause in an eternal instant. So, when we read these most challenging words, my best advice is that we give these folks a well-deserved break! Knowing their painful predicament, we should give them the pass they clearly well-earned back in their highly toxic day. As for us, the only hatred we are allowed, if we are allowed, is to hate the hate that drives so much of the world’s ills. Yes, it is more than okay to hate hatred, to hate violence, injustice, poverty, hunger, inequities in all their manifestations, racism, bigotry, prejudice in its graphic and its most subtle forms, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, xenophobia, and every other phobia that not only diminishes but even has the capacity to destroy our sometimes fragile and frail humanity. One of my neighbors has a sign in their yard that brings a smile to my face every day when I make the short trip to work. It succinctly states, “Hate has no home here!” May it be so for all of us! Hatred of hatred, in all its demonic forms, is just fine, perfectly acceptable, a trait we can even encourage and nourish as part of our prophetic witness, fueling our socially just testimony, social justice the core, yes, very earthly minded, the centerpiece or cornerstone of Jesus’ message and meaning, mission and ministry. Yes, there is much to hate in this life, but it includes the likes of no one! Yes, hating our brothers and sisters kills! Hatred kills the body, the spirit, the soul! As we live each day seeking after the very spirit of Christ, striving to emulate Jesus, the one we yearn to follow, the man of history who has taught us well, everything we need to know to live life fully and be all we can be. May Jesus continue to be our ultimate modeler and molder, each one of us gladly and joyfully becoming the clay in his never hateful, but always loving hands. Yes, be a lover, not a hater, and all will be well!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and desires to make and mold us after the divine will, making us all lovers! Amen and amen.