

# The Cousin that No One Talks About

Hespeler, 25 September 2022 © Scott McAndless

[Jeremiah 32:1-15](#), Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

Every family seems to have at least one member that everyone else just struggles with. I'm not just talking about those members who hold different political positions from the majority or who happen to believe weird theories about vaccines or international cabals of child traffickers. I mean, family is family, and the truth of the matter is that we don't all have to believe all of the same things in order to get along and love one another.

No, I am talking about the kind of family member who just has a way of taking all of that too far – who just refuses to talk about anything but their strange theories, even when it is clear that everyone else is doing their best to change the subject so as to not start an argument. I'm talking about the person who floods everyone else's social media with photos and quotes from dubious sources and who is very quick to say that anyone who disagrees is an idiot or a sheep. That can be a little bit much.

## Family and Divisive Times

And so, what do we do in that situation? These are divisive times when people everywhere seem to be at odds with each other, but the very last thing we want to do is see that division creep into our families. So, we don't really want to cut ourselves off from those family members completely. Sure, we might choose to block them on Twitter or Facebook because we just can't deal with their issues on a daily basis, but we won't cut all ties.

We will still make a point of inviting them for Thanksgiving or Christmas even though we know things may get uncomfortable. We will include them in the family discussions about what is going to happen to the old family homestead when Mom and Dad eventually pass on. We don't write them out of any wills because, well, family is still family, and we are willing to tolerate a bit of discomfort in order to stand up for that.

## Hanamel's Cousin

So, can you imagine the person that I'm describing here. If you don't have somebody like that in your own family, chances are but you know somebody who does. It seems to have become a very common experience. Well, I want you to understand this morning that, for Hanamel, the son of Shallum, his cousin Jeremiah was *that* person in the family. Nobody in the family liked Jeremiah.

Do you want to know how bad relations were between Jeremiah and that extended family? The whole family had lived in the town of Anathoth in Judah for as long as anyone could remember. As is the way in many a small town, just about everyone who lived in Anathoth was related to everybody else by blood or by marriage.

Jeremiah had grown up in Anathoth, had become a man there. But he didn't turn out like most people who lived there. He began to have visions and insights. He had an extraordinary ability to not only see what people were doing wrong, but also to foresee the dreadful consequences of their actions. Above all, he had absolutely no hesitations about sharing such



insights.

## Jeremiah was Annoying

So, Jeremiah started going around and pointing out to his friends and relations what they were doing wrong. He didn't care if someone was his elder or if they had been in their position for years and were highly respected. It was just not in his nature to hold back.

And the most annoying part was that he was often right. People *were* getting things wrong. But being right didn't make things better. Jeremiah could never be gracious about it; he was too self-righteousness. So, people generally ended up hating him all the more. To say that things got very strained in Anathoth would be a gross understatement.

## When Jeremiah Left Town

Let's just put it this way, Jeremiah left Anathoth because nobody wanted him there anymore. And, yes, he went from there to Jerusalem, the big city. He went on to bigger things and to have a bigger impact and to find a lot more people to hate him. But he also did not leave on good terms. There were a whole lot of hurt feelings in his wake.

As he left town, Jeremiah said, **“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the people of Anathoth who seek your life and say, ‘You shall not prophesy in the name of the LORD, or you will die by our hand’— therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: I am going to punish them; the young men shall die by the sword; their sons and their daughters shall die by famine, and not even a remnant shall be left of them. For I will bring disaster upon the people of Anathoth, the year of their punishment.”** (Jeremiah 11:21-23)

When that is the last thing you say to your family and the people you grow up with, there really is no coming back from that.

## Jeremiah in Jerusalem

Of course, his friends and family in Anathoth were hardly the last people that Jeremiah rubbed the wrong way. As time went by, he managed to offend just about everyone in Jerusalem as well. He particularly clashed with the kings who ruled in the city, especially the latest, King Zedekiah. When Zedekiah's nephew had rebelled against Babylonian overlordship, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon had come and deposed him, elevating Zedekiah to take his place.

Zedekiah should have supported Nebuchadnezzar in return. But, pushed by the anti-Babylon faction in the city, he had followed his nephew's foolishness and stopped paying taxes, rebelling against the powerful king. It was pure, unadulterated stupidity. And Jeremiah was not the kind of man to stand idly by while this kind of thing was going on.

## New Enemies for the Prophet

Jeremiah condemned the king and everyone who had supported this doomed rebellion against Babylon. He proclaimed that he spoke for the LORD and declared that such a course would doom the entire nation to destruction.

Nobody, least of all the king, wanted to hear any of it. In fact, as tensions with Babylon rose, more and more people started calling Jeremiah a traitor and a foreign agent. He was barred from speaking in the temple. Once they even threw him into a deep cistern. Lately he had been placed under arrest in the court of the king's guard.

The worst part, as usual, was that Jeremiah was right. Things went badly very quickly. The Babylonian army came. They invaded the land of Judah, laid waste to towns and villages everywhere including Anathoth, by the way. And they put Jerusalem under siege. At this point nobody needed prophetic powers to know that the city would fall, the kingdom was doomed. But being right didn't endear Jeremiah to anyone, especially as he was the kind of guy who never hesitated to say, "I told you so."

## Hanamel's Decision

When Hanamel went to see his cousin Jeremiah, he was not looking forward to the visit. Sure, they had grown up together, but, after everything that had happened, they hadn't spoken in years.

He especially wasn't looking forward to it because of why he was going. He was going because Jeremiah had been right all along. As he had prophesized so many years ago, their shared hometown of Anathoth was suffering from a disaster.

The Babylonian invaders on their way to Jerusalem had, almost as an afterthought, destroyed the entire countryside. Anathoth was in ruins. There was nothing left there for Hanamel and his family and they had fled to Jerusalem with many others before the city was put under siege.

## Why he Needed to See Jeremiah

They had, like many other refugees in those days, decided to escape and go to Egypt. But in order to make it there, Hanamel needed to raise some cash. His decision to sell a piece of land that had been in his family for generations was an act of desperation. I mean, who would want to buy a field that was occupied by the enemy? But desperation was their only course of action at this point.

According to the ancient laws of Israel, lands were supposed to remain in the extended family forever. So, before he even tried to sell it to anyone else, Hanamel had to offer it to his last living male relative. Yup: Jeremiah.

## A Dreaded Interview

Hanamel made his way into the king's palace where his cousin was under arrest in the court of the guard with a sinking feeling. He had replayed the conversation he was expecting many times in his head. He fully expected Jeremiah to laugh in his face, to tell him that he should have listened to him all those years ago and left Anathoth too. He expected Jeremiah to make him feel like an idiot for thinking he could get anything at all for a now worthless piece of property.

Hanamel braced himself to hear the inevitable words of his cousin, "I hate to say it, but I told you so." He didn't want to put himself through such an ordeal but, you know, family is family.

## Jeremiah's Prophetic Performance Art

I find it fascinating that we are told this story in the Book of Jeremiah from one point of view. We get Jeremiah's side of the story. And Jeremiah, the prophet, only tells us that the reason why he chooses to do what seems to everyone to be a foolish thing and actually buy Hanamel's field and pay what it would be worth in ordinary times is because God tells him to.

Jeremiah, as a prophet and a natural showman, makes a big deal of doing the purchase in public and then taking the unusual step of preserving both copies of the deed to the land in an earthenware jar so that they will last.

This all makes a clear prophetic point. Even if Jeremiah is right and the whole country will be destroyed, God will not completely forget God's people. There will be a return. People will again possess

the land. They will just need to wait a really long time – like a deed preserved in an earthenware jar.

That was the prophetic performance that was inspired by God. But just because Jeremiah did that because it was what God wanted him to declare, doesn't mean that it was his only motivation. I'd like to think that there was also a personal dimension – you know, cousin to cousin.

## How it Went

The guards let Hanamel into Jeremiah's cell. When they heard why he was there, they decided to permit his visit because it might be a laugh to see his disappointment. But when he entered, nothing went as Hanamel expected. Jeremiah embraced him immediately – seemed genuinely pleased to see him.

"God told me that you were going to come," Jeremiah said matter-of-factly. "I would be so pleased to buy your field."

Hanamel was so taken aback that he began to apologize. All of the positive things he had rehearsed saying about the field went out of his head and he actually began explaining how worthless it was now.

## Reconciliation

But Jeremiah just waved all of his objections away. He would hear none of it. I'm going to give you seventeen shekels of silver and I don't want to hear another word about it. And I know that I'm doing this because God wants me to say something to the whole people at this moment when everything seems so dark, but I am glad that the message that I have to give allows me to do something that will do some good for you and your family.

I'm not going to say that I was right. I'm not going to say I told you so because now, now that the worst that I feared is coming to pass, I have finally realized that there are things that are more important than being right – things like hope and family and the people we love.

## Families Divided

We find ourselves living, it seems, in very divisive times. Everything, from politics and public health policy to electric vehicles and wind turbines, seems to be an excuse for people to line up on opposing sides of the issues and start fighting. But it is one thing for such issues to divide us on a political level, it is quite another to see them disrupting some of the most important relationships in people's lives. When families start to fall apart because they can no longer abide one another because of differing opinions, that is devastating on a very personal level.

There seems to be no question that Jeremiah was that kind of divisive figure in his own day. His prophecies and pronouncements definitely had a way of setting people at odds with each other. But what he did when he decided to buy his cousin's field was a definite break from the way that he usually operated. For the nation, he offered an unusual message of hope, even if it was a hope that was a long way off.

## Never Too Late

But I am also struck by how that act of hope was an act of mending broken relationships with his family. I am pretty sure that Hanamel had given up a long time before on any hope of being reconciled with his cousin. But maybe this story can stand as a reminder that, no matter how much water has flowed under the bridge, it is never too late. We should never give up on those people. I'm wondering, even if you were right in the dispute that you had with someone you care about, what might you be able to do to bring about reconciliation that previously seemed impossible?