

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 ~ 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Soul Focus

15th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Ordination/Installation of Ruling Elder ~ September 18, 2022

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Introduction

If you ever need to silence a room quickly, all you need to say is, "Who would like to lead us in prayer?" It works every time. Even at a church meeting of Ruling Elders. Even at a church meeting of pastors. Watch the body language: adults suddenly employ the technique we all developed in school when we don't want the teacher to call on us. Over the years, I have come realize, it's not because they don't have an active prayer life. A person, or a church body, can be deeply spiritually, drawing from the Divine well of compassion, mercy, and wisdom throughout the day and night. Yet, when it comes to praying out loud, the definition of prayer suddenly narrows. The genre formulaic. And so, we'd rather be silent than get it wrong. Willing volunteers often preface their spontaneous out loud prayer with an apology like, "This won't be very good, but here goes." Whenever I hear that, my heart thrills because I know their prayer will be something spontaneous, bubbling forth from that person's soul. (Let's admit that Presbyterians, including me, are generally speaking, not particularly good at spontaneous.)

I think we all agree, that prayer, spontaneous or prepared, is primary. The prophets, Jesus, and his apostles certainly did. In 1 Timothy, one of the pastoral epistles that has been attributed to Paul, he begins with instructions to church communities about prayer. Maybe they had some of the same issues as we do when it comes to praying. Today's second scripture lesson is actually the longest discussion of prayer in the entire New Testament. Keep in mind this epistle was not written not until early in the second century, most likely. By this time, these church communities are trying to sort out their identity as people of faith within the culture where they live. With Jesus as Lord, they were facing the challenge of how to be fully engaged in the messy, political world as Jesus was, and yet at the same time, to not be of it.

With Christ, in the school of prayer, we too can learn how to rise above and transcend the divisions all around us. Yes, my friends, Jesus can teach us how to face, how to embrace the pain of our broken world head on, and not let it break us. Or break us apart. May "The weeping prophet" Jeremiah along with these instructions to Timothy open our hearts, as burdened or broken as they may be, to the saving and healing Word we need to hear this day.

Sermon

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your level of pain?" Who among us has been asked this question by a nurse or doctor at some point in our lives? Raise your hands. I've also been in hospital rooms with family members and parishioners when they have been asked this question. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your level of pain?" The answers range from, a smile and an answer, "Oh, none really, so 0 or possibly 1;" to an anguished faced, a pinched voice saying, "20!" I have always found that question difficult to answer. Even when I was in a lot of pain. I'd think, "this is bad, but it could be worse. Hard to put a number on it." I find it even more difficult when it comes to emotional or spiritual pain. Even harder to put a number on that kind of pain. Nor is there a drug that can really heal the core of it.

Most of us do what we can to avoid pain or deny it in one way or another. Especially when the source of the pain is grief and sadness. As Richard Rohr has said, "We really don't know how to hurt. We simply do not know what to do with our pain... Unfortunately, most of us, men especially, have been taught that grief and sadness are something to repress, deny, or avoid. *We would much rather be angry than sad...*" Is that true for you? It is part of male coding in our culture. It is more acceptable for men to be angry than sad. But I think for many women, myself included, we were taught that it was better to be silent or sad, than angry. It wasn't until I was working with my psychotherapist that I realized this truth in the way I had been taught to deal with my emotions. No matter how intense my negative feeling may be, I would call it disappointment, frustration, sadness, but not anger. Especially for white girls like me raised in the church somehow, we translated the command to "love our neighbor as ourselves" into "be nice and pretend everything is okay, even when it isn't." Last time I checked, I didn't see that one in here (holding up my Bible).

The truth is: God does not avoid pain. Neither does Jesus. Quite the opposite is true. God's extreme and eternal love for Judah and Jerusalem, caused God's pain and tears. When Jeremiah's call began it was 623 B.C.E., and everything was definitely *not* okay in the land of Judah. Far from it. It is difficult to discern whether the lament here in Jeremiah 8 is uttered by God or by Jeremiah. Both voices seem to be present here. Truthfully, it is not important or necessary to distinguish between them. Rather, the ambiguity may be intentional and speaks volumes. God's sadness and Jeremiah's are interwoven. Yes, there has been a drought in the land, the failure of the crops, and the prayer for a spring of water are meant literally, but also metaphorically. The lament is born of God's judgment on a sinful people. Deliverance is denied, for the moment.

As much as we love the beautiful African American spiritual, sung by our choir as an anthem this morning, "There is a Balm in Gilead," the scripture text actually leaves the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" unanswered. In fact, the third question, "Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" implies that there must *not* be a balm. Rather than rushing to false or premature assurance, Jeremiah stands *with* his people in pain, waiting for a future as yet disclosed. In the refrain of this spiritual, as African American theologian Howard Thurman has written, "The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point: There is a balm in Gilead! Here is the note of creative triumph. It is this creative triumph in the face of absolute despair that has touched the taproot of our faith tradition."ⁱ

In Psalm 30, we read, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with morning." We may wish this guaranteed a literal 12-hour turnaround from tears to smiles recovery formula. But we all know otherwise. This poetic phrase can encompass many nights, many years, even generations of weeping, as the slaves who created this hymn knew all too painfully. As Easter people, they knew and we know that Love *ultimately* wins. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, by and by.

Friends: my message to you today is this: There is a balm that heals the “sin-sick soul” not only in Gilead. It is inside each of us. It is the gift of tears. From deep lament can come core healing. Our tears can make the wounded whole. As individuals and as a nation. Whether it be your own pain, or the brokenness of our nation, or world; whether you would scale it at 1 or 20 on the pain meter, listen to it. And together let God lead us from lament to action for all God’s hurting people and for God’s hurting creation. The Bible gives us language for lament that we often overlook. Did you know that 50 of our 150 Psalms are Psalms, or prayers of lament? Yes, my friends our Bibles are moist with the tears of individuals and nations in all kinds of pain.

But what about right now? Pain is pain, whatever the circumstance or the root cause. As much as we want it to be over or try to deny, avoid, or skip over it, whatever the source of our soul pain God is with us in it and speaks to us through it. Sometimes we have to cry for a very long time...Tears only come when we realize we can’t fix it and we can’t change it. The situation is absurd, it’s unjust, it’s wrong, it’s impossible. *She should not have died; he should not have died. How could this happen?* Only when we are pushed to this edge do we let the balm of tears do its best work. You can tell your tears have healed you when you don’t need to blame anybody, even yourself, anymore.ⁱⁱ

Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. And not just a little. He wept and wept. Jesus also wept over the whole city of Jerusalem, just before he chose to suffer and die, and to experience unspeakable human pain and grief to free all us. And all the world. As Christ’s followers, I hear Christ calling through these instructions to Timothy and the lament of Jeremiah, a call to prayer for “everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions” that best begins with shared lament and tears. May we open our hearts and our spirits to the brokenness within and around us, that together we may find our healing path.

I will give the final word today to Frederick Buechner, prolific spiritual writer, novelist, Presbyterian pastor who just completed his life on earth at the age of 96 in August. You likely heard quotes of his from this pulpit (downtown). In the 80’s and 90’s he was quote more than anyone alive at that time. I just learned that his call from God to the ordained ministry occurred while listening to George Buttrick preach a sermon at Madison Avenue Presbyterian. At that point in his life he was already a bestselling author. He recalled the watershed moment like this: “Tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face... It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon.”ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps this experience helped to form his word, written years later, about the gift of tears as prayer. Here it is:

“Tears—You never know what may cause them. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you’ve never seen before. A pair of somebody’s old shoes can do it...A horse cantering across a meadow, the high school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next.”^{iv}

ⁱ C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'There is a Balm in Gilead,'" Go to: umcdiscipleship.org. This is an excellent and thorough article, well worth the read!

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Beloved Sons Series: Men and Grief* (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2005), CD, MP3 Audio. Reference to Richard Rohr on p. 2, first paragraph also comes from this source.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin B. Copenhaver, "Frederick Buechner's Many Benedictions," *The Christian Century*, October 2022, pp. 48-49.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark—A Doubter's Dictionary*, (HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA, 1993), p. 117.