

**September 18, 2016 - 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

*“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” (Jeremiah 8:22)*

This week I completed a short online course called “Bridging the Political Divide”, taught by Parker Palmer, a well-known Quaker elder, educator, author, and activist. The course consisted of four brief videos and questions for each video segment. The one segment of teaching which most surprised me and challenged my assumptions was the 3<sup>rd</sup> one, titled “Our Deepest Divide”. Palmer started out by asserting that “our deepest political divide is not between left and right, but between people who are completely cynical about the whole political process and those who maintain hope for democracy and the possibility of being a good citizen”. He went on to say that “hope is not blind optimism. It’s looking squarely at the brokenness of our lives and being able to look beyond that, at what Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton called “the hidden wholeness in our lives and the life of the world.”

Cynicism and Hope as the deepest divide. This gave me great pause, especially as I considered the Old Testament lesson and psalm for today. We could have no better companion for the times in which we live in 2016, no more germane words than those from the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah. We have been hearing his words read the past several Sundays, with their pronouncement of impending gloom and doom for Judah, yet also holding out the tiniest glimmer of hope that the people might yet see the light, give up their idols, turn back toward God, and once again let God have God’s rightful place at the center of their lives, especially as a community of the faithful – who at that particular point were not being faithful. They had by their choices, alienated themselves from God.

Well, the gloom has gotten gloomier, and the doom, palpable and inevitable. In today’s reading from Jeremiah we hear the cries of someone who is broken-hearted and in mourning. The words are full of pathos, and at points we’re not sure who is speaking, Jeremiah or God. Jeremiah has become so attuned to God’s heart, that he feels not only his own pain from his people’s actions, but God’s pain for and with the people. God is experiencing deep grief and so is Jeremiah. It is much like a parent’s heart breaks when a child goes off the rails, and you are at once angry about their choices and behavior, while at the same time you are in such deep grief, as you have to stand by and painfully watch your son or daughter struggle to cope with the negative consequences of their own choices and actions. This is not a God who is far away, distant and disengaged. God’s heart is intimately engaged with, and deeply bound to the people of Judah.

The people of Judah had fallen under the influence of the secular, pagan world in which they found themselves. Drifting further and further away from their first love, they expected that they could call on God at any time and God would swoop in like Superman and save them from disaster. But they had in essence let go of their end of

the relationship with God, neglected their responsibility to be attentive to God. They seemed to believe that God would fix everything. God would ensure that nothing bad or painful happened to them. But they would learn that this is not how the Almighty God - who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt - relates to God's beloved.

Jeremiah asks: *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"* The balm of Gilead was a resin that came from a balsam tree, used for healing and medicinal purposes. Have you ever been in that place - looking for a quick fix to a deep and painful problem? Surely there is some ointment, some over the counter remedy we can put on this little rift between us and God. Is there a doctor in the house? "The implication in Jeremiah's question is that the disease infecting the life of the people is more devastatingly chronic and morbid than can be remedied by physical means. It is a disease of the spirit, the mind, the heart, and the will". [Dwight Lundgren in the preaching commentary *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 4, p.77].

Is there no balm, nothing to soothe, and make this pain go away? Sometimes the answer to that question is no. In humility and vulnerability, sometimes in life the only thing left to do is just sit and keep company with the grief, hurt, and disappointments that come. For Jeremiah and his people, the reality is that this wound was far too deep and serious for a simple band-aid or salve to help heal it. What was really needed was a heart transplant.

With these words of Jeremiah, we are invited into a spiritual discipline that the church has not done very well in cultivating and practicing over its history. It is the spiritual discipline of lament.

In the Old Testament, a lament was a song sung for a person or a group of people who had died. Laments are found in the writings of the prophets - there are several in Jeremiah - and in many of the psalms. The spiritual work of lamentation involves three parts. The first part of the lament is the NAMING - identifying "Where does it hurt?" What is the beautiful thing that has died and so has broken your heart? This naming functions like a eulogy does today at funerals.

The second part is the actual words of lament, usually in the form of poetry. Often the lament begins with the words "how", "where", "what" or "why?" In vs. 5 of today's psalm 79: "How long will you be angry, O Lord...? In today's reading from Jeremiah the "where" is implied: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" In other words, "Where are you God? Has God left us?" And as Jesus cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", a line which appears in Psalm 22. This 2<sup>nd</sup> step of the lament gives full voice to the tragedy of the current situation. Past splendor and prosperity sit in stark contrast with the present misery.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> part of lamentation is giving voice to, and lifting up consolation and hope. In the first two steps everything gets laid out openly and honestly before God. The sadness, the anger, the despair, the regret, the bitterness, the desire for revenge, the loneliness, abandonment, and hopelessness. All those feelings and words that come from the gut

and heart – these prayers that come to us in the laments of Scripture have not been edited and prettified. They are raw and real. To utter them is to believe that God cares, listens, and wants to be in relationship with us. To withhold these thoughts and feelings from God is to call into question the authenticity of our relationship with God. A spirit of lamentation looks around and names the trouble, notices the things that are painful and broken. The one who laments does not deny or pretend the brokenness isn't there. Practicing lament is not whining. Behind the naming of what breaks our hearts, there is in the very act of lament an implied spark of hope. Things should and could be different but they aren't. So we turn to the only place left to us – to God, in hope. To lament is to take the first step toward new creation. When there is no fixing that can be done to heal the brokenness, the only thing left to do is move through the place of death to enter into new and transformed life. The way of death is the way of vulnerability, of letting go. And vulnerability is the source of God's strength.

But this is not a message we will hear from the culture in which we live. What we hear from the culture around us is that given enough money and military power, enough education and technological savvy and advancement, and enough time, anything and everything can be fixed. This follows the notion that the potential for human progress is unlimited, moving in a positive, forward, and upward arc. We are now living in a time of tremendous disorientation, social upheaval and rapid change. And many are coming to see that the once accepted notion of unlimited human progress is seriously flawed, if not blatantly impossible, and is too often destructive. What I see and hear in the world around me are individuals and groups giving voice to their mourning, the cries of lament that lie deep in all our souls – crying for the loss of health and safety; for the certainty of basic needs of food, shelter, and work to be met; for connection; for dignity and respect; for peace and caring for the common good.

The faint glimmer of hope in our present-day lamentation is found in the good news of our Christian faith. The good news is that God makes God's self present in the midst of history to help his people. This is the golden thread that runs through the entire biblical record of our faith. And especially in those times when our faith is put to the test – not by God – but by circumstances and the realities of life, God will be there with us in mercy and compassion as we struggle to face into the disorientation of change and loss, and eventually move us toward re-orientation in a new place.

Isaiah, another of the great Hebrew prophets wrote about one who had not yet come, but who was anticipated to come in God's name to bring healing to the world's brokenness, to bring salvation. God would make God's self present to his people in human form, described by Isaiah as "the Suffering Servant". Writing of the suffering servant the prophet said: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief. . . But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." The early Church saw in Isaiah's words a description of the ministry and reconciling mission of Jesus. They saw a sure and certain healing balm for the whole troubled world.

The spiritual we will sing during Communion today answers in the affirmative Jeremiah's question "Is there no balm in Gilead?" with: "There IS a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul." This hymn was first sung by African American slaves wishing for balm for all their hardships, the inhumanity, indignity, terror, separation, and violence of their lives. In spirituals like this they claimed Jesus and through him the hope to endure, hope for an end to suffering, hope for the healing balm of eventual liberation and freedom. This amazing spiritual was born from the depths of a spiritual and moral crisis in our nation, the effects from which we have yet to be healed. We have yet to come fully to believe and accept completely that God makes God's self present to us in all our brothers and sisters, in our neighbor.

We gather together here to be nourished and strengthened by Christ. It is then part of our call to become healing balm for others. For those who are hungry, some of that healing balm will be meals, and freedom from food insecurity. For those who find themselves in places and situations of violence, the deepest healing balm will be peace and safety. For those who are homeless, healing balm will be a place to rest, a home to live in. For those who feel disconnected and lost, the healing balm will be community and contribution. For all who suffer injustice, the healing balm will be justice. We become healing balm through our actions, our awareness, our refusal to remain ignorant, our willingness to advocate and speak up when any person or group of people is being spoken about disrespectfully and pejoratively. For to remain silent is to allow the wounding to continue.

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has recently appeared in a new video about the Episcopal Church. He describes our work as followers of the Jesus movement as living into and out of the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus. And to make that happen, to borrow the words of St. Augustine on prayer: "Without God we cannot. Without us God will not." Being part of the Jesus movement is to join Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit become healing balm for the life of the world. This requires being constantly called back to remember who and whose we are.

It is my deep desire that our Trinity faith community will have the courage and will to lament and name where we are broken – as individuals, as a church, as a community, nation, and world. It is my prayer that we will hold on, not succumb to cynicism or be overcome by forces that oppose God, but reach out in hope to the faithful God who is ever and always in relationship with us, desiring for us and the whole world to experience healing, reconciliation, wholeness, and new life. And I pray that our words and actions will become more and more the balm of Christ, for the healing of one another, and for the healing of the world.