

The Reading of Hebrews 12:1-6

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,^[c] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.”

The Reading of Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

¹⁸My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.

¹⁹Hark, the cry of my poor people
from far and wide in the land:

“Is the LORD not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?”

(“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,
with their foreign idols?”)

²⁰“The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.”

²¹For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

²²Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?

9 ^[a] O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!

Prayer of Confession:

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, *too real to hide, and too deep to undo*.
Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear,
and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we
cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to
grow more and more in your likeness and image; through Jesus Christ, the light of the
world.

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“Too Real to Hide, Too Deep to Undo”
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Kerra Becker English

Unfortunately, rather than making a statement, “There is a balm in Gilead,” this text asks us the question, “Is there NO balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” The answer that Jeremiah comes up with and the answer singing this spiritual provides are two totally different answers. Gilead, as a place, is mentioned 80 times in the Old Testament and all of ZERO times in the New Testament. It was known as a mountainous region east of the Jordan River and the name itself means “the stones of testimony,” or “the heap of witness.” Gilead is a place with stories to tell. Gilead was also well-known for its miracle cure, the balm made from a particular tree that was reported to have significant healing properties. But the question remains about our sin-sickness, “Can it be healed?”

Let’s not rush too quickly to an answer here. Our inclination is usually to jump as fast as possible to the happy ending. Of course, there will be a cure. Of course, there will be hope. Of course, there will be an adequate remedy for the consequences of human sin. The arc of history is long and it always bends toward justice, right? Jesus will come and we will be saved, right? The plot line may thicken for a bit, but it has to be resolved, it just has to be!

But Jeremiah can’t and won’t resolve it for us. Instead he intimately divulges his own prophetic grief. His fountain of tears, his heart-sickness often have Jeremiah described as the weeping prophet. Renowned Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann, says that our descriptions of Jeremiah are often inadequate. He says, “*Jeremiah is frequently misunderstood*

as a doomsday spokesman or a pitiful man who had a grudge and sat around crying; but his public and personal grief was for another reason and served another purpose....It is clear that Jeremiah did not in anger heap scorn on Judah but rather articulated what was in fact present in the community whether they acknowledged it or not. He articulated what the community had to deny in order to continue the self-deception of achievable satiation. Jeremiah knew long before the others that the end was coming and that God had had enough of indifferent affluence, cynical oppression, and presumptive religion. He knew that the freedom of God had been so grossly violated that death was at the door and would not pass over.” (The Prophetic Imagination, p. 46-47)

In my estimation, this is the sadness that Jeremiah shares with God. God too grieves the turning away of the people, and Jeremiah participates in that holy grief. The call to confession will remain unanswered in this liturgy. God asks for the people to turn back, but they don't. We might ask, if only, if only they had been able to look at what was going on and amend their ways. But no, the reaction is already anticipated. Little will change, that is, until God changes everything.

But never fear, we have a weekly Sunday ritual of confession! I wonder though, does it truly turn us toward repentance or is it just a prayer we recite because it's printed for us to do so in the bulletin? I might even agree with you that sometimes our printed prayers seem a formality to me too and I'm the one who decides what goes in there. But the one that we spoke together today hits me every time even we pray it though it's probably the one most familiar to me and is completely unoriginal. It's been around for quite some time. I see it as kind of the confession

side of the serenity prayer – as the reminder of our own very real depravity that leads us to the wisdom of needing to make changes in our lives. *Our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. We ask God to forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment.* Now, I don't know about you, but I've felt that lost in sin, which means that whatever mood I find myself in on a given day, I still always find myself sympathetic to the depth of this confession. I think these few lines of prayer say more about sin than any voluminous doctrine or checklist of the "thou shalt nots." The weight, the reality, and the depth of our own ability to hurt others can make us sin-sick, heart-sick, mournful, and could quite possibly spring up a fountain of tears.

I do realize that in our social context, it may be easier for women than for men to be seen crying like a fountain. Grief, though is an equalizer. It doesn't matter your gender, we all share in the pain of death, and for Jeremiah, it's not just one death, it's a complete reorientation of who the Hebrew people understood themselves to be. It was going to be national death, cultural death, which would bring about suffering at all new levels. It was going to be all over, and all because the people could NOT hear, could NOT change, would NOT be moved by hearing the corporate confession Jeremiah was putting forth on behalf of the people. He was calling on the royalty, the priesthood, and the prosperous to experience the real anguish of the masses who were being taken advantage of and oppressed, and plead for God's almighty intervention, but the words meant nothing.

So, Jeremiah makes a diagnosis. There's nothing more he can do. There's no magic cure. There's no physician who can heal what's broken. Therefore, there's nothing left but grief, great

sobbing grief. The Lord is going to withdraw from Judah, from Israel – and it's going to be painful.

Let's get back then, shall we, to how exactly the spiritual gets us from Jeremiah's *no balm in Gilead* to an assurance that there IS a balm in Gilead. The American slaves who began this song of freedom had to have some inkling about this passage in Jeremiah to come up with the lyrics for the song. I don't think it was a mistake or a misreading though that led them to a different kind of hope that lies beyond such grief and hopelessness. I'm inserting my own speculation here, but what I think they shared in common with Jeremiah was an understanding that the world was run by powerful people who were blind to how their power was built on the backs of the powerless. What I think they also took to heart was that Jesus had his moment of grief, despair, and hopelessness too. From the cross, all was lost. Jesus was forsaken. The enterprise finished. The thirst unquenchable. But it is through this pain and grief, this death, this ending, that hope can be reborn. If you understand the balm in Gilead to be the promise Christ makes to both make the wounded whole and to heal the world's sin-sickness, you will know that the power of sin is a power that has to be broken, shattered into a million little pieces in order for something new to be resurrected. The tears of those wounded by those sins of power and possession are sacred, holy, and may even be medicinal in the ways they lead us either to change our ways or be crushed by them completely. Granted I'm not a deep student of hymnology, nor of spirituals in particular, but I do know that the songs that come out of the slave tradition were the freedom songs, the songs that helped them to either survive or resist the impossible lives they were living.

My suggestion then is that we give Jeremiah's grief a place and far greater consideration as it relates to the painful view from the cross. To experience suffering alongside of God, as the

grief-filled prophet, or as a follower of Jesus in his darkest hour is to know the true healing power of the resurrection. To know that Jesus died for our sins means we have to die to them too – perhaps knowing that we like to hang on to them a little bit too much. It's when we notice the heaviness, the reality, and the depth of our sin that grieving for the brokenness of ourselves and our own cultural reality will make sense, and will begin turn our hearts toward God. It will only be through experiencing the death of what holds us clinging to that sin so closely that will open the pathway to resurrection. May we be so grieved in our spiritual lives. Amen.