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A Word from the Lord-Let Our Hearts be Broken

Jeremiah 8:8-11, 18-22

Jeremiah 8:

8 How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us', when, in fact, the false pen of the scribe has made it into a lie?

9 The wise shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what wisdom is in them?

10 Therefore I will give their wives to others and their fields to conquerors, because from the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.

11 They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace.

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

19 Hark, 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.'

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

22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

Matthew 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

¹⁴And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

¹⁵He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

¹⁷And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The year of seminary that I spent working in a hospital, I had a badge that identified me as a chaplain intern, which I wore rather awkwardly, wishing that the designer of said badge had given a little more thought to font sizes. The word "chaplain" loomed so large, that I was afraid people would miss the smaller, and more important, letters which spelled out "intern."

In general, I focused on smiling a lot and being willing to pray with people, hoping that those two things would be sufficient to pass me off as a pastor. Sometimes it was easier to fake than others. On Sunday mornings, I would lead worship, and afterwards I'd make my rounds on the units. There was a nurse on one of the units—his name was Darryl. He was a gregarious man, with a big smile and an easy laugh. We chatted easily through the week, but on Sundays, he had this habit that made me a little uncomfortable.

Each Sunday, when he saw me walk in from the worship service, he'd turn to me, sling an arm around my shoulder and say, "preacher, I need a word from the Lord today. Give me a word, preacher, what's the word?"

Well, over the course of a couple weeks, I tried a couple of different answers to this question.

The first time, I tried to explain that I'd slaved for countless hours over that morning's sermon, that he really needed to hear it in the context of the whole worship service, among the people gathered, that to try to sum it up for him would violate the whole nature of the Proclamation of the Word, that I was sorry, but I really couldn't boil down fifteen minutes of thoughtful theology and carefully chosen language into a word.

The second time, I stammered out something about being Presbyterian, which I hoped would be sufficient explanation for why I couldn't provide a word from the Lord on demand.

The third time he asked, I blurted out, "Jesus loves you, Darryl!" and gave him a self-conscious smile and an awkward thumbs up. He responded with a good-natured grin, but we both knew he wanted more.

I'm thinking about Darryl today because, well, today feels like a good day for a word from the Lord. And today I'm feeling a little more in touch with that chaplain intern who found such a word hard to find and harder to speak.

One of the great Reformed theologians of the last century, Karl Barth, is often quoted as saying that preachers should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another. This is a very helpful image because it reminds us that the Word of God is not some long ago utterance that was captured in a book where it would remain confined for the rest of its days, but that the Word of God is living and active, so very much in touch with the world that that Word took on human flesh,

made himself at home within the world, and has not stopped doing so since. But Barth's image is in other ways a very challenging one, because it calls us to continually, *continually* bring what we know of the Bible to bear on the lives we live out in this very real world, to seek and strive and struggle until the Word speaks into the huge, heartbreaking headlines in today's newspapers.

This week as I've held the newspaper in one hand, I've found the Bible in my other falling open to the book of Jeremiah. You might remember from our sermon series last fall that Jeremiah is the weeping prophet, the one who confronts the chaos of near-exile in Judah with anger and judgment, yes, but primarily with words of grief. And whatever corner of the modern globe you pick—Syria or Gaza or Ferguson or Western Africa—grief and lament are fitting and faithful responses to the profound suffering we see. Along with Jeremiah, we can say, "I hurt, I mourn, dismay has taken over me. For the hurt of these people, I hurt. My heart is sick."

But as I've wanted Jeremiah to sit in the dirt with me and to shake his head with me at what this world is coming to and hold my hand as I offer up my tears as my only sacrifice, I have found him cold comfort. Because Jeremiah is not interested in tears that cleanse the conscience, but in hearts that are broken by sin and turned once again toward God.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sees in Jeremiah's grief a powerful hope.¹ He says the problem with God's people is that we so quickly became numb. That we have a remarkable way of adapting to our circumstances, even when those circumstances are exactly the kind God longs to set us free from.

¹ Much too pithy summary of *Prophetic Imagination*.

We get used to lifting heavy burdens as part of life under Pharaoh's rule, used to living in a society where the rich feast and the poor starve, used to finding still more horrifying headlines in each day's paper. But Brueggemann says there is hope in grief. Because when our hearts are soft enough to hurt, when a prophet's tears spill over into our own eyes, then the word of God can penetrate our numbness and remind us that all is not right.

That is why the cry of the false prophets, "Peace, peace," when there is plainly no peace, is so threatening to the word of God: because those prophets with their platitudes would lull the people back into numbness, soothe them into a way of being in the world that is far from the way God intended it.

Which is the other reason my Bible kept falling open to Jeremiah this week.

When the news broke fourteen days ago that an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, my heart broke, as I suspect yours did, at the loss of life. When I woke up each morning to more news about curfews and tear gas and riot gear, my heart broke still more, as I suspect yours did, to see the brokenness of our world on full display.

But as news about Ferguson began to work its way from the front to the back page of the papers this week, I grew scared. Scared that this wound in our corporate human body would go on bleeding while false prophets of peace soothed us back into our seemingly ordinary ways of life.

Eighteen months ago many in this congregation began to talk about issues of poverty and how we could be better neighbors to our neighbors, and we started meeting friends in the community who had similar hopes and could teach us lessons

from their own experiences. And the more conversations I had, the more people told me we needed to understand more and talk more about race if we were going to get very far in this work.

So I signed up for an anti-racism workshop in May. I flattered myself to think I had a reasonable grasp on the problem of race in this country, that my awareness of my own privilege and my friendships across racial lines were sufficient to keep me on the right side of that problem. I expected I would go there and learn how our mostly white congregation could better build relationships across racial lines. But at the workshop, I learned about how nearly every indicator of well-being in our country—health, education, social services, employment, wealth, and criminal justice—reveals persistent disparities between white Americans and people of color.² I got a lesson in the institutionalized, government-sanctioned oppression of minorities that my high school history books skipped right over. And I was forced to face still more squarely my own privilege, prejudices, and fears.

So I came home and started going to meetings and reading articles and listening to stories of people right here in Durham engaged in civil rights struggles, past and present, and I heard more and more how there was no peace in places and spirits I assumed to be settled.

The most recent of those stories I confess challenges me as much as any I've heard lately. It comes from my friend Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who is a Christian living and ministering alongside people in Walltown. I spent a week of my

² Workbook from Racial Equality Institute, racialequalityinstitute.org. Sources cited there include Center for Disease Control, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, *Race Matters in Child Welfare* by Crane and Ellis, etc. etc.

sabbatical with their community at the Rutba House last summer and left marveling at the way that deep faith in Christ has led Jonathan and his friends wading ever deeper into the difficult terrain of poverty and violence and injustice, making friends with all kinds of people as they go. Jonathan wrote a reflection last week on what he has observed in the lives of his neighbors, our neighbors, as they live *six blocks away* from the front doors of this church. Jonathan writes:

The first Tuesday in August is National Night Out in neighborhoods across urban America. Roadblocks stop traffic on one block or another as old men roll grills into the street and the young fellas gather for a pick-up game. Grandmas put their lawn chairs out on the sidewalk, and little girls skip rope double Dutch until they fall over on the ground laughing. I love these block parties. They've been a staple of summer life in Walltown since before we came here in 2003.

But I didn't go to National Night Out this year. As much as I wanted to be with my neighbors, I couldn't stomach the police dancing in the street and slapping high fives for one evening while they patrol Walltown like a militarized zone the other 364 days of the year.

Don't get me wrong: I like the idea of a National Night Out. Local police partner with communities to "take back the streets" and create safe places for folk to be together. In places where violence has driven folks off their porches and out of the parks, coming together on the block can be a bold act of community building. Indeed, I've seen it happen right here.

But any partnership depends on trust, and my young neighbors have been teaching me how difficult it is to trust police culture in our neighborhood today. Beyond the age of thirteen, any young black man in Walltown knows that he is subject to being stopped on the street, asked for identification, frisked and possibly put in hand-cuffs while officers "check things out." Jamal or Tyrone do not feel any better about this treatment for having seen Officer Brown do the electric slide last week. I can't shake this reality that they've forced me to see. I can't say, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.³

³ "Love is the Final Fight," *Turning Again* email by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, August 12, 2014. Used with permission.

If that story makes you as uncomfortable as it made me, if it's hard to imagine that things are really that bad, you might look at the data. But you would not find comfort there; it shows that racial disparity in searches pursuant to traffic stops in Durham is even greater than it is in Ferguson.⁴ In fact just this week a report on alleged racial profiling is making its way through the city manager's office to city council.⁵ Nine community partners, among them Durham Congregations in Action, with whom this church has a history, have asked the city for a response.

Faced with these statistics and the faces they represent, how do we respond?

We could do as the people of Judah and plug our fingers in our ears, insisting that all is well with the world, shouting out "peace, peace," even as an army of destruction marches closer.

We could make it a story about *other* people, vilifying the police and a profession that demands courage, nobility, and integrity. (If you haven't prayed for or reached out to the police officers in our community in the last two weeks, now is the time.) But to make the problem of race the problem of any one group of people is to forget that our struggle never has been against flesh and blood, but against the powers and principalities which stand in opposition to God's gracious rule.

We could get caught up in the details of any one particular news story, focusing on whether Michael Brown had his hands up, whether Darren Wilson was hurt in a struggle before ever firing a shot, whether what followed were peaceful protests or criminal riots, whether Molotov cocktails or rubber bullets flew across

⁴ Stops and searches data for 2013 pulled from <http://ago.mo.gov/VehicleStops/2013/reports/161.pdf> and <http://trafficstops.ncdoj.gov/>

⁵ "Durham report on racial profiling draws crowd," by Jim Wise, *News and Observer*, August 21, 2014.

the lines first. But if we drown in those murky waters, we will never tend to the wound that is still bleeding all over this land.

Or, if we decide not to ignore and not to blame and not to distract, we might look truth in the eye and repent. Weep with Jeremiah over the inequity in our world and cry out for a better day. Acknowledge the ways that we have tolerated, contributed to, or benefitted from a system where advantages are dished out according to the color of one's skin. Confess our participation in this injustice, turn away from our sin, and walk toward the new creation that is ours to claim in Christ.

Because, my friends, if the day comes that Ferguson ceases to be news and we who call ourselves followers of Jesus haven't followed him deeper into this wound, we may as well write our names in beside the false prophets Jeremiah condemns. Because to claim there is peace when the bodies Christ came to save bear the marks of violence is to shut our ears to the word of God and convince others to do the same.

But if we let our hearts be broken open by Michael's death and Durham's data and Jeremiah's grief, we may find ourselves face to face with the Word of God and drawn deeper into his work in the world.

So maybe the chapel will be full next week as Katie leads a Sunday School class on white privilege.

Maybe we will find ourselves listening with new ears to the stories of people whose skin color is different from ours, checking ourselves every time the thought "surely it isn't that bad" crosses our mind and opening our ears again to hear. Maybe our friendships—within and outside of racial lines—grow a little more

intimate as we gather courage to ask hard questions and speak vulnerably of our own experiences.

Maybe our reading list looks a little different this month as we determine to do some hard work educating ourselves on the ways that racial injustice is as much a part of American present as it is our past. I have a list I'd be happy to share.

And maybe we start preparing ourselves for those conversations and stories to lead us places we never would have led ourselves—into uncommon friendships, uncomfortable conversations, or the halls of power in our community or our capital.

That's where the apostle Peter ended up, though he never would have guessed it on that day that Jesus asked him the million dollar question. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked. And Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And right there on Peter's words, Jesus decides to build a church. Weeks like this make you wonder why Christ ever thought it a good idea to build his church with human beings, human words, human effort. But through Peter, we are given more than just responsibility in this passage; we're also given a promise. That the gates of hell, better translated the power of death, shall not prevail against us.

The work ahead is significant—to turn the streets of Ferguson and Durham into the streets of the kingdom will mean we have to walk further down the path of discipleship than we have yet done. But thanks be to God, the work is not ours alone. For the one Peter recognized as Lord is the one through whom God is reconciling the whole world. Love embodied which will not stop crossing boundaries, be they heaven and earth, divine and human, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile. Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, and

beckons us to follow in his path, grave clothes trailing in his wake as the gates of hell shrink in the distance. He is Lord. Will we follow?