

September 23, 2007
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-7
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“Healing the Heart of the City”

Jeremiah’s lament over the people of Judah is deep and heartfelt. In the midst of a failing society, Jeremiah cries:

“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.” (Jer. 9:1)

Jeremiah is in distress because the people have turned away from God. The nation of Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem are teetering on the brink of disaster. Injustice, idolatry, hunger, indifference, greed, corruption and immorality prevail. How do you heal the heart of the city? Who cares for the welfare of the city? Who is watching out for the poor and the most vulnerable of the society? Certainly not the king, or the courts or the priests! So, Jeremiah weeps for the people he loves. The people feel abandoned by God saying, “Is the Lord not in Zion?” The nation is under threat from the Babylonians. To make matters worse, the harvest has been bad. The harvest season, which is normally a time of joy, has not brought any relief to their suffering or hope to their hearts. It appears that there is no balm in Gilead to heal the wounds of the people. Jeremiah takes no pleasure in announcing God’s judgment. His calling as a prophet brings him no joy. He is pronouncing judgment upon his own people whom he loves.

In these days, we hear many people lament the health and well-being of our city, nation and world. We are troubled by the staggering drop-out rates and shocking violence in our schools. We shake our heads at the difficulty of helping children and youth, who have little to no support or encouragement at home, to learn. We hear laments about public safety, the dangers our law enforcement officers face each day and the quality of life in our neighborhoods. This summer and fall, we faced a tax revolt from angry citizens whose property taxes skyrocketed. The bonds of our civil society have been stretched thin by angry accusations and demonstrations.

As a nation, we struggle to find the right approach to the war in Iraq; we grope in the dark as we seek ways to stop terrorism and build a more stable and peaceful world. We face problems with immigration, the environment, health care and the economy that seem bigger than our capacity to envision a solution. Many Americans are disillusioned about politics as usual, political polarization and political posturing.

Sometimes the cries get so loud, the anxiety so overwhelming and the distress more than people can bear. Otherwise good people simply check out of engagement in public issues, become indifferent to the needs of others and retreat into a world of their private concerns. There is a very real danger that if we give in to this temptation we will become captive to a very small world defined by endless entertainment and mindless consumerism. We will destroy our capacity to be fully human. To be fully human means to live life to the glory of God and in loving community with others. We wonder if there is a balm in Gilead to heal our brokenness.

There is a balm in Gilead. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a balm to heal the wounds not only of individuals, but also of the whole human community. The purpose of the church is to be a healing presence in the world. The church is in the midst of society to offer a vision of God’s intentions for humanity and to point the way to the redemptive power of God. As reformed Christians or Calvinists, we believe the church has a significant role to play in civic affairs.

First of all, Paul says to young Timothy that we are to pray for rulers and for those in authority. Their authority is derived from God. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that the governing authorities are God’s servants for the common good. Therefore, in praying for them, we are lifting up this essential connection between their authority and God’s authority. Such prayer reminds us of the responsibility leaders have to seek God’s wisdom and do God’s will. Whether they know it

or not, our leaders serve a holy purpose and not their own personal interests or personal gain. Our leaders serve a higher cause. They are to build up the common good and enable all to live what Paul calls “a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” (1 Tim. 2:2).

In his classic work, *Moral Man in an Immoral Society*, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about the moral resources the church has to offer society. Niebuhr noted how difficult it is for a group or a society to be moral. As a religious community, the church is motivated by the power of love. Such love expresses itself in the larger community as the desire for justice. In human affairs, love promotes the common good and seeks to create a just and peaceful society. Love challenges us to look not only to our own interests but to the interests of others. Niebuhr said that, operating in the spirit of love, the religious community can help check the selfish nature of special interest groups, political parties and governing bodies.

The role of the church is to remind our leaders that they serve a higher cause than a particular social class, economic group or political party. They are to seek the good of all citizens, not just the narrow interests of a few. We all stand under a higher authority. If a political or civic leader is not a believer, we still pray for that leader. We can hold that leader accountable to what is best and most noble in our own political tradition. In *The Declaration of Independence*, we read that all people “are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These fundamental concepts are certainly rooted in the great affirmations and stories of scripture. The heart of our city and our nation will not be healed until our leaders realize that they have been given a sacred trust. Our leaders need our support and our encouragement, rather than our cynical contempt. Calling them to remember their sacred trust to seek the good of all can help them exercise their authority as God intends.

Secondly, the role of the church is to give a larger vision of the kind of community God intends for humankind. Have we as a city decided that the level of violence in our community, the performance of our schools and the condition of our neighborhoods are acceptable? Sometimes it certainly appears that way. In spite of the best efforts of many of our leaders and many our citizens to create a more peaceful and productive community, too many of us seem to have acquiesced to a small vision for our community. God wants us to build the “peaceable kingdom” in which the wolf and lamb, leopard and the baby goat, the cow and the bear, lion and ox and even the little child and the deadly snake live together in peace. (Isaiah 11) God has a vision of a community in which the elderly are blessed, the young are nurtured, food is abundant and joy is shared by all. God envisions a community in which we, as a city of Asians, native Hoosiers, Africans, transplanted Southerners and Latinos, Muslims, Jews and Christians can live together with and learn from each other. The church can provide a space for people with different ideas from different backgrounds to talk peacefully and respectfully about vital issues in our community.

Have we decided that it is acceptable for 25,000 children to die each day from hunger, or for war to be a satisfactory way to settle disputes between tribes, ethnic groups, religions and nations? Sometimes, it appears that way because war and famine continue unabated around the globe. This is not God’s vision for our world. God “makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow and shatters the spear.” (Psalm 46:9) Jesus looked with compassion upon the hungry multitudes and fed them. My point is this: the Scriptures give us a big, broad and healthy vision of true community.

Finally, the role of the church is to provide leadership for the community. We are to live useful lives of service. Steve Stoughton, a former legislator, consultant on social issues and member of our congregation, recently wrote a book on leadership entitled, *A Letter to Hoosiers: a Call to Transform Indiana*. In the book, Steve discusses the crisis in leadership in which community, state and national leaders are consumed by self-interests and narrow visions and do not have a strong commitment to serve the common good. Stoughton claims we need leaders who are agents of social transformation, not caretakers of the status quo. He notes how effective leadership emerges from people with broad vision and spiritual motivation. It is essential that we become people of character, spiritual strength and moral courage.

We need to teach our children and youth these same virtues so that they may be strong leaders in our community as teachers, businesswomen and men, volunteers, civil servants, medical professionals, social workers, attorneys, ministers, political leaders, engineers, parents and scientists. I am constantly astonished by the character of servant leadership I see among

so many of the youth in our church. As parents, and as a congregation, we need to renew our commitment to nurture the faith of our children and youth and to help them develop strong moral character. God has made them to be servants of God's kingdom in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. We need to talk with our children about our faith, help them know the great stories of God's people in the Bible and in the history of the church, and teach them by example what it means to be a servant leader in the larger community. Then they will become leaders who serve the purposes of God in whatever vocation they choose.

God longs to heal the heart of the city. Like Jeremiah and Timothy, our faith in God is the greatest resource we have to offer our hurting world. People of faith, who have a vision of what God intends for all humanity, who have the courage to do what is right, who stand up for those who have no one else to care for them, and who are willing to sacrifice their personal gain for a cause larger than themselves are healing balm for our city, nation and world. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole.