

Written on Our Hearts
Jeremiah 31:27-34

Just one week ago, on Easter Sunday, the work of five or six individuals with bombs took the lives of more than 300 people in Sri Lanka, many of them children. Luxury hotels and celebratory church services were targeted. Many stories have circulated describing families on vacation, couples on their honeymoon, and people traveling for business being killed while eating their breakfasts in their hotel dining rooms. And, stories of worshippers sitting in their parish church on arguably the holiest day of the year for Christians around the world on which we celebrate that following his arrest, betrayal, and death on a cross, our great teacher and leader Jesus was resurrected. On this day of celebration and jubilation, bombs exploded killing countless human beings, including at least one entire family. As we sat in this beautiful light-filled space, our hearts soaring as the triumphant trumpet played, the fragrant lilies in their cross shapes confirmed why we were present, and the black cloth was removed from our golden sanctuary cross, an idyllic and celebratory scene of worship was being destroyed, and lives were snuffed out as quickly as candles. While it's still early days with a lot of information flying around and arrests have been made, so much remains unclear. It has been suggested that this violent and deadly attack

was carried out as a response to the savage killing of 50 people in their mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand just last month. The unspeakable violence in Sri Lanka follows a period of 10 years of hard-won peace in that nation, following decades of violence among different religious groups. These events break our hearts into a million pieces, and we ask, “How long, O Lord?!”

We receive an answer of sorts from our scriptures today. The once-reluctant prophet Jeremiah says, “In those days they shall no longer say: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.” According to Hebrew Scriptures scholar Walter Bruggemann, “The book of Jeremiah is reflective of and responsive to the historical crisis of the last days of Judah, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 Before the Common Era. This crisis is the dominant and shaping event of the entire Hebrew Scriptures.” Jeremiah operated as a prophet before and during the Babylonian Exile, during which many were deported to Babylon, and others remained in their own land, but not under their own government. What is extraordinary about the prophet Jeremiah is that early on in the book, he utters harsh and judgmental phrases towards the people, not mincing any words about what will befall the people for following other gods instead of remaining true to

their one God, master of the universe. The people had forgotten to live by the code their loving God had given them, and they went on to suffer as a result. Not because of God's vengeance, but rather because of the events that had been set in motion naturally through their own actions. At the point of the book we study today, Jeremiah is speaking of the compassion and forgiveness of God, letting the people know that despite their former behaviors, God wanted to make a covenant with them. An affirmation that God was putting God's law within them, written on their hearts. There had been brokenness before, but here Jeremiah tells the people that a new day has come, despite their foolishness and lack of faith. But this book makes it abundantly clear that the people were responsible for the exile because of their behavior. As my Chemistry teacher Mr. Lupo said often with deep feeling, "We make our own misery." Now, this is a tricky bit of theology, so I want to take some time to unpack it. I do NOT think the message here is that God wishes to punish disobedient children because God is bent towards vengeance. It's true that there are some passages that could give that sense, but overwhelmingly, the images of God throughout the scriptures are of God changing God's mind, the softening of God's heart to become warm and tender, God as a Mother Hen, God as one who watches over even the smallest sparrow. Throughout the ages, people have asked some version of the question,

“Why do bad things happen to good people?”, because we want to understand how the brokenness in the world we see around us could possibly reflect the goodness of God. The only satisfactory conclusion I have ever personally come to is that out of God’s great love for us, God gave us a world and free will, but because we are human and not Divine, we have not treated this world or our fellow humans lovingly much of the time. Each of us, in our own ways, and of course to varying degrees have treated the earth as a playground instead of a holy of holies, and we have treated our relationships on personal and political levels as games to be won instead of blessings to be honored. And even yet, God has loved us through it all, has seen our hearts and known our goodness there. God grieves our pain and suffering and loss. We cannot explain some things, but we can know that at the center of everything we experience, there is a loving God who will not let us go.

The prophet Jeremiah quoted a proverb that presumably was widely known and used the ancient world. That is, “the parents have eaten sour grapes, and their children’s teeth are set on edge.” Jeremiah was sharing a hopeful prophesy, in which people would live differently. When I first really thought about this proverb, I interpreted it as a prescriptive statement, that children should suffer because of the actions and decisions of their parents. But with study and time,

I've realized this proverb was intended descriptively, that is, the reality is that what the older generation does and says DOES impact those who follow them. As Newton's Third Law tells us, every action has a reaction. Wars lead to other wars, World Wars 1 and 2 being prime examples. Violence and terrorism leading to more, as in the case of the Sri Lankan massacre just last week. And just yesterday, a shooting in a California synagogue at the end of Passover. What's that old adage? If we don't learn our history, we'll be doomed to repeat it?

Thinking about learning or failing to learn from history, you may have read Kalamazoo's Reading Together book for this year, "The Hate U Give." We'll also be viewing the movie together here tonight at 6:30pm, and I hope you'll consider coming. The main topic of the book and film is police brutality towards people of color. It's a beautifully, heartbreakingly told story through the voice of main character Starr. Starr lives in a low income, mostly black neighborhood, but because the schools are inadequate and her parents value education, they drive Starr and her two brothers out to the suburbs to attend a prestigious private school that is predominately white. Starr expresses the amount of work it takes to be two different Starrs—one who dresses and plays the part in her urban neighborhood, and another who dresses and plays the part for wealthy, white classmates. Amid all of this, an event takes place (that I won't give away, in case

you intend to read the book or watch the film) that turns everything on its side. At the same time the traumatic event takes place, one of her best friends from childhood engages her in a conversation about the late rapper Tupac Shakur's use of the phrase THUG LIFE, which stands for "The Hate U Give Little Infants Harms Everybody." I chose to leave the swear word out, but you get the message. At first Starr doesn't understand, but as her friend explains more, she begins to see that what he is talking about is the sourness of grapes setting the next generation's teeth on edge. People who are discounted, discriminated against, given fewer and disparate opportunities because of the color of their skin surely hurts them, but it just as surely hurts all of society. This nation is rooted in slavery, and yet we rarely talk about it except for a passing comment. Two hundred plus years of chattel slavery that strategically separated families, in most cases deprived them of education, and gave access to a version of Christianity that supported the subversion of one group with the promise of heaven to get folks through the torture of earthly life. Most Christian Bible scholars of the time in fact used scripture to support the system of slavery. And of course, there were more than 100 years of Jim Crow, which allowed people their "freedom", but created two inequitable societies that deeply limited social mobility and accrual of wealth. That kind of history doesn't just wash away with time. As Dr. King so

beautifully said, “Without hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.” Simplistic thinking could lead us to assume that high rates of poverty among the African American community in Kalamazoo with more than 51% of African American children living in poverty in Kalamazoo County as a character deficit based on race rather than the real story of strong segregation, inequitable access to education, home ownership, job opportunities, and generational wealth. It is our privilege that allows us see the disparity without understanding the structures that create it, and how we have been benefitting. Benefitting, even though we did not set the system up in the first place. Talking about racism and identifying the structures that continue to hold it in place so that they can be transformed is hard. It takes time, energy, putting guilt and defensiveness to the side and considering our resources that may seem too precious to share. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, and that means seeking out just systems that free us all. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has this to say about our responsibility as Presbyterians, “Racism is the opposite of what God intends for humanity. It is the rejection of the other, which is entirely contrary to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. Because of our biblical understanding of who God is and what God intends for

humanity, the PC(USA) must stand against, speak against and work against racism.” There are many ways to engage something that has so much power to shape future generations. We can read books on systemic racism and how to change it, attend a racial equity workshop, or get involved in our denomination’s racial justice work. This study and work can be done by anyone, but it begins with an awareness that this broken system is central to American life. Our unwillingness or fear of facing it will not make it go away. As Romans says, we must “not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds...discerning what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Last Sunday, as I sat in this packed sanctuary, and surveyed the scene of incredible people in their Easter bonnets from the back pew, I was filled with hope, imagining all of the gifts among us to share with this battered world. As Seth read the scripture from Luke 24, in which two of the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, it suddenly occurred to me that it is always in brokenness that we see Jesus. In war, poverty, hunger, racism, illness, and pain and suffering of every kind. Jesus does not bring us these things, but as we prepare to deal with human suffering of all sorts, we see Jesus clearly, because he loves us enough to be with us in it. We see Jesus in brokenness because we know that with his help, we can try to work towards a new kind of wholeness. We see

Jesus in brokenness, because we know that he, who was taunted and tortured and suffered on a cross, understands. We see Jesus in brokenness because we know that even the brokenness of death could not end his ministry. Let us not forget that as Jeremiah said, God's law has been written on our hearts. God is **our** God, and we are God's people. This is stronger than all the brokenness in the world.

The hate we give the most vulnerable among us surely comes back to harm us. But just as surely, the love we give also comes back. Love in the form of an open mind and a willingness to grow. Love in the form of humbly learning from our mistakes. Love in the form of serving meals at CTV or Ministry With Community or working with kids at Edison School. Love in the form of bravely abolishing systems built to benefit some more than others. Love in the form of trying to avoid sour grapes that hurt others. Love in the form of walking to raise money for the nearly 800 million hungry people around the world through the CROP walk. Lately, I've been thinking about love as a boomerang. We throw it out, and it just comes back. Over and over again. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good", Romans says. With THAT written on our hearts, no one's teeth get set on edge. Amen.