“No Magic Pill”

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On September 18h, 2016

Focus scripture: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

It is difficult to tell who is speaking in our passage from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, today. Jeremiah’s voice blends with God’s voice. He not only takes on God’s anger, he actually feels the grief of God at the suffering of God’s poor people. He pours out the Lord’s anger over the people’s abandonment of their covenant. Their disrespect of God, in favor of foreign idols. The way that they neglect the poor and the oppressed.

They have broken their relationship with God.

This is the pain of prophets: to stand between God and the people. He cries out for the people to return to God and restore their relationship. And at the same time he recognizes that in many ways it is too late.

The damage has already been done.

Traders who were descended from Ishmael, from the northern city of Gilead, have been known to bring a balm that heals and soothes sores. But in this case there is no balm. There is nothing that can mend this situation.

There is no magic pill.

There’s no substitute for their relationship with God.

Jeremiah is known, even today, for his weeping and lamentation. He has such empathy for both God and the people, he feels all of the sadness.

These days, our culture would tell us there *is* a magic pill:

* the diet pill,
* the perfect lifestyle,
* clothing and makeup so that we will be desirable, the perfect date, the ideal vacation.
* There is the exercise program that will finally get us in shape and make us loveable once more.

These things say “you can be happy all the time”. They substitute for a relationship with God.

The politicians do the same. They say:

* we will make America great again,
* everyone will have jobs,
* we will solve the drug addiction crisis
* we can make everyone safe *all the time*,
* college will be paid for,
* we can have quality, affordable health care and housing for all.

And none of this will cost any of us a thing. If they actually told the truth about what it would take to implement these dreams, they would stand no chance of being elected. The truth is there is no magic pill. It will take enormous effort and sacrifice to make America the kind of place we would like it to be. One thing that is necessary is to face the fact that many, many people in America and in the world beyond suffer deeply on a daily basis.

There is a capacity in humans, and perhaps other animals, to empathize. It means that everything cannot be OK with us if someone else is suffering. And, the problem with that is that someone is always suffering. If we allow the suffering in, then we suffer too. There is no escaping it.

There is only relationship with God.

An online video attracted my attention this week. It is called “Healing” by the Salt project, and is featured in the Oprah Magazine. In this video a young woman dressed for an occasion with makeup and a tiara, removes high heels and steps into a bathtub as water is running. Despite the makeup and clothes she is visibly sad and close to tears. The sound track reminds us we are not made to be happy all the time. Life hurts and it’s hard. Not because you’re doing it wrong, but because it hurts for everyone. Sometimes we have to live with sadness.

“Don’t numb it” says the narration, “don’t run from it … all the wisdom and courage you need to become the person you need to be is inside your pain. Let it come and let it go, let it leave you.”

But dwelling in the sadness can be so hard. It is so tempting to numb it with whatever we can find: food, drink, … filling every waking moment with busyness and activity. These are our modern day idols, the things that separate us from relationship with God

This past summer, while I served a church nearby my home, it seemed that we were stuck in a “bad news” cycle. The first week, as I drove over to meet the congregation, news broke about the shooting that killed 49 and wounded 53 mostly young people in an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando.

In the weeks that followed, the stories of two young African American men killed by police made it into mainstream news. One took place in St Paul MN, the other in Baton Rouge LA.

This was followed by 5 Dallas police officers killed by a sniper at a protest against police shootings.

On Bastille Day, July 14th, in Nice, France, a tractor-trailer was driven into celebrating crowds killing 86 people of all ages. Many more were injured.

An elderly Priest was killed in his church in Rouen, France.

An Imam and his assistant were gunned down after Friday afternoon prayers in their mosque in Queens, New York.

The tragedies just kept coming, on and on. All summer.

The story that drew me in the most was the lament of the girlfriend of the man in St Paul, as she watched her beloved slip away.

"Oh my God, please don’t tell me he’s dead.

Please, don’t tell me my boyfriend just went like that.

Please, don’t tell me this, Lord.

Please, Jesus, don’t tell me that he’s gone.

Please, don’t tell me that he’s gone.”

On Facebook, I got into an exchange with my brother in England, who sometimes can be critical of what goes on in the USA.

He asked: Are the police in America out of control? Or just out of control when it comes to dealing with people of colour?

I replied: I don’t know, Andrew, it’s complicated.

He came back: Unbelievable. Whatever you say about Britain I just hope that this would not happen here any more … Certainly not more than once without an uprising.

Me: There's nothing good to be said about this. I think the most we can do right now is share the information as widely as possible, in whatever format will awaken people to the fact that these are real lives just like theirs. Change is a long, slow, heart breaking process.

My brother: Quite - it's been slow progress since the abolition of slavery. (sad face)

Me, getting irritated: We get it, Andrew.

[Him: Yeah, I'm agreeing with you 100% Sis. (X](https://www.facebook.com/andrew.raby.5?hc_location=ufi) for a kiss)

Me: Sorry, I'm truly heart broken and actually weeping

Of course, I didn’t keep it up, this weeping for those who were hurting.

I couldn’t. And so, I was relieved when there was a break in the news cycle. Even though I know that it hasn’t gone away.

The suffering, of

* those effected by hurricanes, earthquakes and fires,
* those bereaved and maimed by terrorism,
* those who lost loved ones simply because they were black,
* those whose loved ones were killed in the line of duty.

After the cameras leave the scenes, the hurting continues. The answer is there is no magic pill, but we don’t have to hold it all. Because we are invited into relationship with God, who holds it with us.

Perhaps the Jeremiah of chapter 8 took on too much of God’s grief. So much he couldn’t even make all the tears he needed. Later in the book of Jeremiah, there will be words of comfort and hope. We’ll hear more about that in the weeks to come.

Centuries later Jesus came to very same city that Jeremiah had wept over all those years ago. Jesus embodied God’s love and God’s grief, because he was in perfect relationship with God. Shortly before his final entry into the city, perhaps standing in the hills above, taking in the view, he wept “[Jerusalem ]…. if you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes…”

But although Jesus took on God’s grief, he also lived a life of joy and gratitude, living life fully, embracing God’s poor people with generous love.

The apostle Paul is another person who lived the grief of God in the world, and he wrote to the Christians in Rome: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” Yes, we must weep with those who weep, but let’s also rejoice with the rejoicing.

I’ll leave you, today, with the words of one of my seminary professors, Mary Luti. Mary is also a United Church of Christ “Still Speaking” writer, and she is someone I see as living with both grief and joy, in a gentle balance. She understands being in relationship with God.

On the 11th of July this year, following the shooting of the Dallas police officers and all else that had happened, she wrote:

'I know there is mourning to do today. There are prayers to say, laments to cry, confessions to make, hard good words that must be preached. There are consciences to search today, actions to organize and undertake. All this is urgent. The moment is upon us. And there is not a moment to waste.

...

but

‘There is no contradiction between lament and gratitude, between confession and awe, between organizing and enjoyment, seriousness of purpose and ecstasy, prophecy and praise. No contradiction between the stern requirements of this awful moment and the beauty of the child asleep on your arm.

'"In the midst of life,” the old prayer goes, “we are in death.” But the reverse is also true: in the midst of death, we are in life. Do something today to re-know it. Re-consecrate yourself today to the fullness of life.'

There is no magic pill.

Feel the sadness and weep with those who weep. And then feel the happiness, feel the joy, feel it all. Let’s re-consecrate ourselves today to the fullness of life. This is what it means to be in relationship with God.

Amen