

Jeremiah 8

This past Friday night I went to the services for the first night of Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Holy Day, down in Brattleboro. This is the most solemn day of the Jewish year. The words “Yom Kippur” mean day of atonement. And the service the first night at sundown is especially contemplative. The lights are low, the Kol Nidre, a traditional prayer to start the holiday, is sung, often to the accompaniment of a beautiful, but mournful cello. The people read through a litany of sins, some symbolically lightly striking their chests. It is not an easy, happy service.

Reading Jeremiah’s passage today after that experience reminds me of a tradition that we people of faith sometimes overlook. We, myself included, generally want religion to be a happy thing. When we come to services we want to be uplifted. We don’t want to dwell on our disconnection. We don’t want to feel the depths of our pain.

And yet, sometimes, the passages we are given reflect nothing but our disconnection, and our pain, and our doubt. Today’s passage is one of those in which the people of God are in a bad way. We don’t know whether this is Jeremiah himself speaking, or whether this passage just reflects the general sentiments of the people of that time, but we know that it shows us just how bad things have gotten in a land filled with drought, and economic depression and despair.

The words tell us, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick....For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?”

The pain is palpable and real. The isolation is undeniable. And God seems very far away.

And yet, this is not the final word. The other night at the synagogue, throughout the service I was moved by the depth of feeling that was evident in me and those around me. Despite the fact that our disconnection from God was the main topic of the night, the most palpable emotion in the room was not despair. Instead, in a very real way, it was hope. Even as the cello played sadly and we confessed sin after sin, there was a sense that God was present, and that repair was indeed possible.

The same is true with this passage. We read it, and we hear the despair, but we also know it is not the final word. We have answered through the years that there is a balm in Gilead. One of our most beloved hymns affirms this. And yet, we can’t be too quick to jump from the difficult parts of faith. We must respect our faith, and take seriously our relationship with God, enough to not gloss over passages like this.

Have you ever been in pain? Have you ever been in a situation that caused you so much hurt that you felt at times that no one cared? Have you ever felt like maybe even God wasn’t there for you?

To some level, probably all of us have. Probably all of us have had a time in our lives where we have called out to God in pain, and felt like God just didn't hear us. Maybe you're even having one of those times now. If you are, you could probably read these words from Jeremiah and feel like they fit you to a T.

We are taught, often, that it's not okay to be angry. We are taught that it is not okay to cry out in our despair. We are taught that we must stifle feelings of frustration when it comes to our faith.

And yet, that is usually not helpful and not realistic. Because we are human, and because we are in a relationship, and because a relationship deserves a sharing of feelings and an honesty with the ones we love. The same is true, even with God.

Sometimes, we have to lament. There was a prayer in the book we used for services on Friday that I wish I had been able to bring back to you word for word. (But I didn't think it was right to steal a prayer book.) It went something like this: When we praise God, God loves us. When we are angry at God, God loves us. But when we are indifferent, when we are disconnected, that is when God is disappointed in us.

Jeremiah and the people cry out to God. And that cry is the sign that something is about to change. Because when we dare to make that first honest connection, and when we dare to talk to God with honesty and not come to God with our false selves, that is when our religious life begins to get serious.

I heard a story this week from a colleague who had grown up an atheist. She wanted nothing to do with God. And then she went through a very rough patch. Maybe what could be deemed a depression.

Someone gave her a prayer to read and suggested she just try it. (She didn't know it at the time, but it was the Prayer of St. Francis.) So she went home, and she sat down in front of the prayer, and put a pencil on the desk. And she said, "God, if you are real, make this pencil move."

Day after day she prayed with honesty and with a real admittance of her doubts. And day after day she asked that the pencil would move. She ended her story this way: the pencil never moved. But I did. And that was enough to show me that God was real.

Her story reminds me that sometimes the best blessings in our lives come not when we face God from behind pious masks or perfectly formulated prayers or a less than honest portrayal of what we are really feeling. They come when we go to God with our true, unadorned selves. They come when we bring our emotions and our pains. They come when we know God enough to trust that God will love all of us. And that's where our peace comes from. That's where the balm is found.

When I was living on the Cape, in Provincetown, I knew a man who had been sick for a long time. I'm not sure exactly how long but it was years. Perhaps as many as about 20 years. We was very thin. We looked very frail. And he apparently had for some time.

I didn't know him well. He came to my birthday party once, I would stop and talk to him on the streets, I'd see him a various settings, and it was always very friendly. But we were not especially close.

He was always in and out of the hospital. One day last March I was in the grocery store and he rolled up with a shopping cart. I thought he was still in the hospital. Instead, he was happily buying up all the corned beef and cabbage in the store in order to cook a St. Patrick's Day meal for his friends. I wondered, how does he find such joy in life when he lives with such pain and such uncertainty?

I don't propose to know the intricacies of his spiritual beliefs. I don't know his exact theology. But I do know that there was an honesty. There was a peace there that I suspect was formed only after honest lamenting. There was a sense of serenity and connection to something bigger than himself. There was an understanding that each day was a gift. There was an acceptance of who he was, and what he had been through. There was honesty. And in that, I think he found his balm in Gilead.

Like I said, I didn't know him well. And so last Monday, when I heard that he had died early that morning, with friends at his bedside, and with his favorite music singing him home, I was surprised when I, one who does not do so often or easily, cried. They weren't tears of sadness, but tears of knowing that he had died a healed man. When he died, his friends turned up his favorite singer, and danced in tribute to him. And that's the way to leave this world. With the peace that comes from finding that Balm, and with a love for the world that leaves it dancing when you go.

God's healing comes to us all. And it comes in different forms. God never removed Johnny's physical illness, but I have no doubt that he was a healed man. Just like God does not magically move pencils on desks, but I have no doubt that God moves us. God responds to us when we value the relationship enough to come with our honest selves, our unhidden selves, our lamenting selves. God knows when we need to find the balm of Gilead, and God is there ready to heal us.

We know this. At some deep level we know it. It's why we sing with confidence that "There is a Balm in Gilead". It's why at the synagogue the other night, even in a time of lamenting and confession, there was a persistent hope. It's why we dare to even ask God to move a pencil that deep down we know that God doesn't have to move. It's why we know that God did not leave Jeremiah and the people without healing in the end.

I'll close with this. A friend of mine was telling me about her father's illness several years ago. She recounted how in the hospital she would shepherd clergy member after clergy member into his room to pray for him. He was a devout Catholic, but he welcomed Methodists and Congregationalists and Episcopalians. (All of whom were called Father,

by the way.) She tells me that the prayers were the one thing that could cut through his pain and bring him peace. They were his balm of Gilead.

And that, for so many of us, is the truth. I always preach about how prayer is about connection. This is no different. Because our healing is about connection too. Our prayers may not be the most perfect, or the most pious, but they are ours. And they are about caring enough to make that connection with God. And in that connection, we will find the Balm. And, in ways we don't even understand yet, we will be healed. Amen.