

St. Paul's Congregational Church
February 17, 2019, Epiphany 6C
Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Luke 6: 17-26

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I have a picture in my mind of some tomato plants I had last summer on my deck – they were growing nicely, the stakes I had were holding them up well. One day when I came home, though, they looked pretty sad – limp, drooping, their color wasn't good. They were loose against the stakes, looked like they'd just about had it. I'd guess many of you know what I mean. So, I took a couple buckets of water and drenched them – in spite of the rainy and wet summer we had, plants growing in pots still needed to be watered! The water quickly soaked in and when I went outside half an hour or so later to check on them, the plants were transformed. Green, full leaves, stems standing tall, the blossoms pointed upward again. They looked great.

That's the image I had when I read the passage from Jeremiah again this week – the tree planted by the water, sending its roots out toward the stream, its leaves stay green even when the heat, the drought comes. A rather welcome image I think, for mid February amid the snow and ice and slush we've experienced this week – with the possibility of more this week.

In the same way my tomato plants – and my cucumber plants, also in pots, withered and drooped last summer, I think all of us have periods when we feel withered and droopy, much in need of refreshment, much in need of feeling rooted, much in need of the life-giving strength by the streams.

And the more I thought about this, I know we not only feel this way as individuals but also as church – as we observe our special anniversary year and are working to look ahead to our future opportunities for ministry in the next 125 years. Please keep this in mind as we continue our reflection on our passages today.

I think the question for us is, by which stream are we refreshed? Where do we go for relief when we feel so withered and weak? We're all here today, gathered in worship, in a variety of states of minds, with a variety of needs. Some of our leaves are full and green – thank God for that. Others are mildly thirsty, others are pale, drooping to the ground. I do suspect we're all here to be fed in some way, to either keep the water flowing or to receive a good drenching.

Wherever we are, the scripture this morning has something for each of us: our passages speak to a cycle we've experienced: that of movement from pain or anxiety to numbness to healing to hope. We have a series of contrasts here: righteous and wicked, trusting in mortals, trusting in God – shrubs in the desert, trees by water, poor and rich, hungry and filled, weeping and laughing. It's all either either/or, isn't it. There's no middle ground, no both/and.

This is hard line stuff here. This is hard stuff to hear. But that's the job of a prophet – to shake people, us, out of our complacency, to meet us where we are and lead us to change, to jar us from our numbness, to force us to change, to feel.

Jeremiah is writing at a time when Israel is at risk: the temple is about to be seized, the people are about to be sent into exile. Take warning, Jerusalem, or I shall turn from you in disgust, and make you a desolation, an uninhabited land. Isn't that what numbness is? A desolation? A sense of emptiness? A sense of nothingness? No feeling? Maybe we know it as depression. No excitement. Nothing to look forward to. A sense of is that all there is? An apathy that's destructive, insidious, our leaves hang limp and we don't care.

Our numbness can also come as a result of our comfort, the plenty in our lives. Most of us are not cold at night. We're not hungry. We have clothing. We certainly have plenty of "stuff" – I know I do. We don't know what it's like to wonder if we'll have enough money to buy milk, bread, eggs, this week or if we'll be able to scrape together enough money to pay the rent or the mortgage this month. All this was pretty clear during the government shutdown wasn't it – the numbness shown by some of those in power was stunning. Why, indeed, did government workers need to go to Food Banks when they went without a paycheck for a month! We could only shake our heads at this incredible lack of understanding, lack of compassion.

It's probably true that most of us have never seen what absolute devastating poverty looks like. Maybe you've made your way early in the morning from Penn Station to the subway line to Wall Street – stepping over people sleeping right there in the subway, smelling the smells, seeing the way a much too large section of humanity lives. We're numb to that.

I think of members of a mission team from Glen Ridge who spent time working in an orphanage in one of the poorest sections of Haiti, or others who took part in mission trips to South Africa or the Dominican Republic, or weekends in New York feeding people on the streets – life changing events for these people – they could no longer be numb, unseeing.

And there are those who are numbed by drugs, alcohol, violence – to deaden the pain. Or inflict pain on others before they can inflict it on us. Numbed by an unnamed anger – an anger that makes us lash out without thinking. Numbed by an emptiness inside that makes us fill it at any cost.

We're numb. Clinging to the past. Numbed by denial, depression, detachment. A sense of "us" and "them". That's not my problem – a lack of awareness of what's going on around us, next door, within our families. Maybe this is intentional, maybe not.

No matter what, that numbness protects us, though, doesn't it. It protects us from our pain, our fear, from looking ahead, from facing that which we know deep down must be faced.

We're probably not so different from Jeremiah's audience. They didn't listen. Wouldn't listen. Were not stirred out of their numbness. Are we?

Breaking through numbness means disengaging from the old. Breaking through numbness means releasing the clinging and replacing it with a yearning. And that's where the healing begins. The healing begins as we can open ourselves to the future. The healing begins as somehow we begin to seek, to begin to think that there just might be another way.

Jesus came with his disciples to a level place, a plain. He mingled with the crowd. People came to him to be healed. People came out of their numbness to be healed. And he spoke to them in the reality of their lives: blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now for you will laugh.

This is all backward, isn't it. It doesn't make sense. The people who have nothing, who are hungry, who are crying, are blessed. Well, Jesus turned the world upside down. And he still does.

In all my years going to Silver Lake – the Connecticut conference UCC summer camp – we came to recognize a barometer of good a week's conference was. We could tell by the number of tears shed on Saturday morning as the participants were leaving – both the conferees and the staff. If there were no tears there was no change, no commitment to the future, no touching of that deep inside of us which yearns for relationship, for the healing we all seek, for the acceptance we all want – whether we can articulate that or not.

Those tears opened us up to the hope that what we'd experienced that week at Silver Lake could continue back in the "real world." And you know, to this day, when I meet people who shared that experience, there's a bond that remains as strong today as it was those too many years ago.

How many times have I talked with people, listened to them tell of their struggles, their worries, their fears. It's when the tears start, though, that the healing begins. It's at the expression of strong emotion, of a vulnerability that comes out, that we can begin to look ahead, when we are able to move on to greater wholeness, to open ourselves to restore relationship. Some of you have heard me call tears sacred water – cleansing water – water that can bring healing.

Jesus is telling us that laughter comes after tears.

Walter Bruggemann in his book, "The Prophetic Imagination" says, "I used to think it curious that when having to quote scripture on demand, someone would inevitably say, 'Jesus wept'". He continues, "But now I understand. Jesus knew what we numb ones must always learn again: a) that weeping must be real because endings are real; and b) that weeping permits newness."

Takes courage to weep, doesn't it. To let go so we can move on ahead. To begin to look forward in hope. To move from numbness to healing to hope. To come to Jesus with an expectation of healing. To come to Jesus as we are with an expectation of hope. To come to Jesus leaving behind, or at the very least, putting in perspective, the things of this world.

The people who gathered on the plain had heard of Jesus, came seeking Him out, to touch him, to receive the divine power they knew flowed through him. Through their tears they came; in spite of their tears they came to be in the presence of the One who could save them.

How do we perceive the saving power in Jesus? What do we hear when Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep for you shall laugh." Jesus is announcing hope. Hope in a future. Hope for better life. Hope in newness. Hope in a different life.

Listen to the warnings: the woe statements in the same passage: woe to those who are rich, to those who are full, to you who are laughing now.

The hope Jesus is announcing is heavy and hard. It's easy to hope when we have richness, fullness, laughter. When things are going well for us, it's easy to look ahead. We can't imagine what it's like to be hungry, empty. There's a real danger to those who are rich in goods, in things. We can lose sight of what's important; we can become arrogant, complacent, too comfortable, too busy, too caught up in our everyday routines to look to the suffering that surrounds us even right here in this town, next door, to the person sitting in the next pew. That's what Jesus' warning is all about.

Jeremiah talks about those who trust in mere mortals, those who make mere flesh their strength. He calls them cursed. But blessed are those who trust in the Lord. Who do you trust? In what do you place your trust?

After we challenge the numbness, release the tears, how is it that we have hope? We come here calling ourselves Christian. We believe that Christ changed things. What is our most basic belief? That God raised Jesus from the dead. If we can believe that, we are should able to believe anything, even the possibility of loving our enemies and sharing our resources with our neighbors near and far. God has come to us in Jesus Christ, conquering sin and death, reconciling the world to Himself. And God promises to all who trust, forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, his presence in both trial and rejoicing. There's the hope. We are not in this alone, ever - far from it.

That living water is within our reach. We can become rooted in it. We can be like those tomato plants with their full, green leaves. We can be like the tree planted by the stream, our roots deep and firmly connected. Unafraid, unworried by drought, by heat, by the scorching of a relentless sun. But we have to reach. We have to release our own numbness, let the tears flow, and look forward in hope. Let the hope overwhelm us. Let the possibility of new life, of change, overtake us. And that is true for us, not just as individuals, but as the congregation of St. Paul's Congregational Church. We have been and are blessed by the grace of God. We are never alone. Thank God for that! Amen.