



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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“Reflection on Jeremiah’s Questions”

Rev. David Jones

“For the hurt of my people, I am hurt...Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?”

Because we are made in God’s image, and because God is love, we cannot help in our time on this earth but to ask this question. I asked this question this week.

This week I learned about a young man named Jonathan who passed away. He lived far away in Dallas, Texas. I had known of him; when I saw the notice that he passed, I recognized his name, and I recalled that he had been sick. But I only knew of him as a voice on the radio.

Jonathan made his living writing and talking passionately about basketball. He was a big guy, around my age, who had an almost philosophical admiration for the Toronto Raptors in 2019 when they went on to win the NBA title, though he was a Dallas Mavericks fan at heart. We had a couple other similarities. He had also discovered faith and the Church in his 20s; actually, probably in the same year that he joined a church community in Texas, I was joining one in Canada. Theology does not typically enter into basketball podcasts catering to a millennial audience, so he was a bit unique. He had a warm and kind voice, there was a gentle confidence about him. He was the kind of person I could imagine being friends with. And so, learning of his passing gave me pause.

I felt I should take a moment to read his obituary. This surprised me a bit. He was basically a stranger to me, a personality rather than a person. But I think just his age, just that his voice was kind, that was enough for me to have a feeling of grief. When you are young, or think of yourself as young, a young person’s passing hits close to home. No one is invincible. I think empathy is like communion, it connects one person to another, you don’t *need* to have anything in common when your capacity for empathy has been nurtured and developed. But even empathy is founded on our material reality, or our creaturely condition. We have empathy for people, because we also are people. Naturally it is easier—not better, just easier—to empathize with those we have things in common with.

I say I was a little surprised to be so affected by Jonathan’s passing when I first learned of it...but as I learned more about him, this feeling of grief deepened. I read about how Jonathan and his wife had a son, barely two years old. How Jonathan had been the picture of health when his son was born. That here he was, making a living at something he was passionate about, in love with his partner, a proud new father, connected to a faith community, had a confidence in the unconditional love of God...this is someone who was whole, whose heart was contented. That’s what his life was like when he started not to feel well. After months of tests and confusion among physicians, he was diagnosed with a very rare type of bone cancer and already advanced to stage four.

Jonathan wrote about cancer and fatherhood before he passed. As I read his piece, he stopped being an individual personality for me. He was someone who always wanted to be a father, and got to be one for only two years. Naturally, my grief deepened. It became a grief for his son, and for his wife and family. It became a grief for myself and for Caity and our family; it became a grief for all who have experienced a loss like this. It became grief for us all, for how fragile human life is.

This is sort of strange. Grief for a stranger can become grief for those we love most. Grief for something that has happened faraway can become grief for something that hasn’t happened in our own

home. Empathy means “in feeling”. We can have empathy or in-feeling for another person’s joy and contentment. When we have these in-feelings of grief, it is called compassion.

As I learned about this young man in Dallas, I also learned a little about his church community. It would probably be hard to find a church community less like ours than the one Jonathan belonged to. But compassion has nothing to do with theology or philosophy or partisanship. Compassion is simply to ‘suffer with’, maybe only for a moment, maybe for a lifetime, and we have the capacity to suffer with anyone. Compassion doesn’t provide an answer for suffering, it only poses the question: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there, who could heal Jon and keep him safe for his family? Why was his health not restored?

I happened to ask this question about this particular man and his family this week, but in our church community, we are always asking this question on behalf of one another. We call them prayers. We are always asking or praying for a physician who can heal, for a little good luck for someone on a streak of bad luck; we are always asking for comfort, for relief, for confidence and peace. We ask for the end of loneliness and isolation, for the end of cruelty and distrust. We don’t check on someone’s beliefs about God before we ask; we don’t check party affiliation or job status. And if the harvest has passed, if the summer has ended, and our friend was not saved, what can we do but weep like Jeremiah? Because the questions and the tears of compassion know no bounds.

They do not even know national boundaries. Probably some of us have experienced grief alongside many people of Great Britain at the passing of Queen Elizabeth. Probably some of us have experienced grief alongside people of the colonized and neo-colonized nations of the world who must feel invisible next to all the attention being paid to this one powerful person. We have continued to grieve for the people of Ukraine and the people of Afghanistan. We empathize with those who have been displaced by war, with those who are war’s innocent victims, who have no power over world affairs and yet suffer their consequences; we have compassion for the father or mother killed in a war or starved by sanctions.

The prophet Jeremiah in our passage this morning only poses the questions of compassion. Jeremiah is speaking to his people on behalf of God, expressing his and God’s profound grief and mourning that the people have wandered from God’s promised path, that they have turned from the peace and the abundance given freely from God’s love. Jeremiah is a big book and it is full of weeping. Jeremiah’s compassion for his people, for his nation, who have lost their way knows no bounds.

But before this boundless compassion, before its heart-sick questions, Jeremiah says that things do not have to be this way. From an earlier chapter, he says to us:

“For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave...”

If our capacity for feeling within what others feel—if our compassion for hurt and loss near and far—leads us to amend our ways and doings, if it causes us to care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, then the losses we suffer will not also mean the loss of God’s presence among us. Illness will not end, and tragedy will not end; it will always be tragic to lose someone. But despair can end, hopelessness can end, violence between people, iniquities between us can be ended.

Because it is not just the pain of illness or the suddenness of loss that we grieve. What brought me to tears this week was thinking about a son growing up without his father, or his father departing without seeing his son grow up. In other words, it is not only the body’s departure that we mourn but the infinite and precious expressions of love between these three people, father, mother, child. But I found that there is a balm through this compassion. If every person who knew Jonathan, if each of his friends and the members of his church and all those who crossed paths with or heard him on the radio and identified with him in whatever small way—if the community draws near to the orphan and the widow, not only to weep but also to act justly, to share who this man had been, to support them and guarantee their wellbeing, to keep the life of the departed alive forever as our ancestors have done with

God's compassion down through the scriptures and houses of worship like our own; if Jonathan's son never feels alone, he still will have grown up feeling an absence, but it will not be a shallow absence, it will not be the absence of a personality or a cliché or stereotype of who and what a father is or should be; it will be the absence of a kind man who loved him named Jonathan, and through a community acting justly, he will not be absent in the end.

There is a balm in Gilead. So long as we keep asking if there is, so long as we keep asking these questions of compassion, so long as we go toward loss and tend to it with reverence and kindness, we will be the balm for each other. We will be, because God will be with us in this place.

Alleluia and amen.