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Trading in Balm

Jeremiah 8:22

It was a rough week for the church; the world church, I mean. As you probably know, the Pope arrived in Scotland on Thursday and has spent the weekend making his way through the major cities of Britain. Attendance at his events has been lower than expected and protest marches have stood out among the waiting crowds. There were even threats made against his life. Does some of the negativity go all the way back to the 16th century when Henry the 8th split with Rome and formed the Anglican Church? Sure. But mostly, it has to do with the terrible sex abuse scandals that continue to come to light, each new case opening up the wound again. Then there have been the troubles in Florida too. The media is still in a frenzy over the pastor in Gainesville who was bent on burning the Quran. Commentators shook their heads wondering how a church could be so hateful and its leader so—how they put it—crazy. Having the words “crazy” and “pastor” in the same sentence always makes me a bit nervous but, that aside, this incident horrified so many people, and, in the end, was painful to watch.

There are innumerable reasons why these cases—these controversies in the church—are so painful but, perhaps the most hurtful reason is that the church exists to heal and strengthen people and when a part of the church reveals that, not only can it not heal, but it has helped make the wound, that is the most painful of all. Because, you see, the church trades in balm. It exists, in large part, to offer and participate in healing. But, in these cases, rather than trading in balm, the church just traded the balm in for some other, lesser medicine.

It is what God is lamenting over in our Jeremiah passage. Just before this reading, God has laid out the terrible judgment that is upon the people because of their behavior. But in our verses all of the anger is gone and what we have left is lament. God weeps for the people, mourns what has become of them, and is even heartsick. Then God says, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Gilead was a region of Israel famous for the balm it traded with its neighbors. This balm had tremendous healing powers and the rest of the regions would pay as much for it as they would for silver. So when God says, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” he is offering a metaphor. Gilead, the place famous for balm, had more of the stuff than they knew what to do with. It was so important that, if it was somehow lost, you would know things were bad. In the same way, Israel, the people famous for their faith, if it cannot be found, then we’re in more trouble than we thought.

Now before we get a big head and think to ourselves, too bad for those other churches and other denominations but we didn’t do what they did. Our hands are clean. But whatever happens in one church affects every other church for people begin to think the church has nothing but controversy and crime to offer. And, we have our own problems; our own ways we’ve quit trading in the healing power of God’s work and, instead, traded it in for something less. As a denomination we are known for fighting. I hope you haven’t, but I’m pretty sure you have, seen newspaper articles about Presbyterians over the years. They almost always talk about how much we argue and disagree. It can get to the point that we cannot even speak to one another. All of this as the number of Presbyterians dwindles. And closer to home, even in our own church, we can treat our neighbors as strangers. We can find it is easier to pass off some artificial balm that asks nothing of us, rather than offering the more difficult

healing that comes from wrestling with your faith. And every time we do that, every time we relinquish our work of strength and healing, we wound someone who needed that healing. Every time we forget that we are the church and what that means, we become like Gilead, without its balm.

But there is good news here. It probably doesn't seem like there is and the prophet Jeremiah is not called "the man of sorrows" for nothing, but there is: for God is mournful and filled with sadness but he has not given up looking for that balm. God is searching, from place to place, asking "Is there no balm in Gilead? Well, then, is it here? Or here?" God still seeks to find places and people where strength and healing and faithfulness are abundant and available and we can be one of those places. We know we have a marvelous history of balm in this congregation and we have continued much of that healing ministry. As we move into tomorrow and each tomorrow after, we are called to greatness for there is balm here. I have heard you speak of it. I have read it on your faces. I have felt it for myself.

This makes our work and ministry more important than ever for people need the kind of balm only faith can provide and they are seeking but they cannot find it. Many even wonder if the church has any balm left to trade. This congregation exists to show them that there is still balm available; God's true healing that can cure sin-sick souls. Indeed, it was a rough week for the church, both around the world and as it echoed back to us. But our Creator is searching still. Where will God find balm that heals and strengthens the people? May God find it here for we have more than enough. Amen.