

SERMON: September 18, 2016 – Jeremiah 8:18-9:1
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today's message begins with an introduction to two states of being: "the way things are"; and "the way things could be."

Back in seminary, one of our professors, Elly Bradley, introduced us to a concept that has been profoundly influential to life and my practice of ministry: the notion of the catalytic gap. The catalytic gap, is that space between the way things are, and the way things could be. It is the working space, where people who seek change intermingle with the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit to try to bridge the gap between brokenness and wholeness.

Part of the reason that Elly's notion of the catalytic gap appealed to me so much, was that it brought together a scientific concept with a theological reality. Reaching back to high school chemistry, a catalyst is something that you add to a chemical reaction to speed it up, and it does so without being consumed by the reaction. In theory, at least, you have the same amount of catalyst at the end of the reaction as you had at the beginning, and that catalyst can be used over and over again to speed up one reaction after another.

Ponder for a moment what that means, when we take that scientific principle, of how a catalyst works, and overlay that onto our understanding of change, and redemption, and new life.

The first thing that jumped out at me with this model, is that it is active: it has a motion, a direction, it calls us to action. Just like a chemical reaction, things start over on the left hand side with the reactants (the way things are) and move over here on the right hand side to the products (the way things could be) and in the middle there is turbulence – the bubbling and popping and fizzing that happens when things in the world are changing. In this model, things are not stuck the way they are, there is potential for change, big change.

The second note of hope sounded by this model, is that things move quicker when the Catalyst is involved. Depending on how your theology works, the Catalyst could be the Holy Spirit, that gift-laden entity that brings wisdom and courage and faith to the task at hand. The Catalyst could be God the creator and parent of all, whose creativity fuels so much positive change. The Catalyst could be Christ, the embodiment of a desire to include those whom the world excludes, in whom we find power even in suffering. Or the Catalyst could be the Church, the meeting place of all our gifts and experiences and abilities and faith, the place where we work out a partnership between what we can do and what God is already doing. While I grant that human willpower can create some change all on its own, my faith asserts that just like a chemical reaction, the process is sped up and intensified when God's deep desire for change gets added to the mix.

And perhaps what I love most of all about this model, is that just like in a chemical reaction, the Catalyst, however defined, is fully involved in the reaction but does not get used up by it. This, to me, affirms the truth of what Jesus was saying, as he spoke about gaining our lives only when we are willing to give up our lives. It says that God is not getting old and tired at this point of the world's history, because God is dynamic, always involved in change and emerging from change and initiating new change, without being broken or consumed by it. It says that we, as disciples and together as a Church can remain compassionate in a world with endless needs without being used up. As catalysts, or as partners with the divine catalyst, we engage fully today, and live to see another challenge tomorrow.

So what does all this have to do with Jeremiah?

Jeremiah lived in a land that was deeply, deeply troubled but nobody wanted to hear about it. To return to our starting equation, "the way things were", was bad and getting worse, as the people and leaders played fast and loose with their faith lives even as the emerging superpower, Babylon, was poised to decimate the nation; yet the leaders of the land insisted that these were glory days – they had arrived at that glorious state, they were already living "the way things could be", everything they were doing now brought a smile to God's face.

Having spent a couple of Sundays listening to Jeremiah, we know that he wasn't the easiest guy to be around. Bible Scholar Jay Williams puts it this way: "Throughout his career as a prophet, Jeremiah was a blunt and stubborn proclaimer of the Word [of God], a Word which shattered all the vain illusions of a people who believed that the Lord was on their side. [In spite of his sometimes] vitriolic abuse., Jeremiah's prophecies reveal a great love for his people, even though he could see little hope for them.

[At various points of his prophetic career, we hear Jeremiah] crying out in behalf of his people, calling for God's help against his enemies, and shaking his fist at Yahweh who has placed him in this dreadful situation." (Williams, pp. 212-213) In other words, although he had a point to make, some of the opposition to Jeremiah may have been opposition to the medium more than the message; he really could be a pain.

But we also know that being a prophetic voice in the land wasn't what Jeremiah *did*, it's who Jeremiah was. He wasn't happy with that, but understood that this was God's claim on his life, and a life devoted to confrontation was how it was going to be. We catch up with Jeremiah this morning in mid-lament, bemoaning the state of his people. In six very unhappy verses of scripture, his lament is built around these words: grief, sick, cry, hurt, mourn, dismay. He asks the hard questions, "is the Lord not in Zion?" (8:19) and "Is there no balm in Gilead? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" (8:22); and these expressions of absence culminate with this: "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!" (9:1). These words are absolutely excruciating to hear, and give a window into a soul that was wounded by the condition of his people.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the land asserted that everything was fine and that bringing any of that into question was akin to treason. In our land, while Jeremiah's lament would not be called treasonous, he would be no more popular than he was in his time and place, and it's mainly for this reason: he wasn't a happy person.

When I try to imagine how Jeremiah would be received in our time and place, the line that keeps coming to mind is, "c'mon Jeremiah, turn that frown upside down." Even though we know full well that we live life in that gap between "the way things are" and "the way things could be", we don't appreciate people who confront us with these realities. As a society, we seem to be fine with people *ranting* about things – on social media, in letters to the editor, on late-night talk shows – but we don't really want to dwell on strong emotions like or anguish or despair, we just want to ring the doorbell of authority, yell something snotty and run away. We don't want to really confront a local economy that relies on copious amounts of cheap labour but has no way to house them. We don't want people telling us that the rising temperatures world-wide is one of nature's ways of crying out to us, even as the United Nations Meteorological Organization (WMO) indicates that July 2016 and August 2016 have tied as the "hottest month in modern times,". We don't want to hear how much harder it is to earn a living wage if you are female, or dark-skinned.

We fear spending too much time bathed in negativity, because it might wake us up to things that need to change, and more specifically, things that need changing that will cost me something I don't want to give up. In the final analysis, I think that North American society today is no more eager to spend time with Jeremiah in the midst of his legitimate expressions of woe, than the rulers of Judah were around 600 BCE. We know that there is a gap between "the way things are" and "the way things could be", but it's a lot easier and nicer to imagine the bright shiny future – or to gripe about its absence - than to really muck around in the slop of today.

The gift that Jeremiah gives us today, then, is his willingness to stand in the Catalytic gap and to yell out from there, "is anybody listening? Does anybody care?" His voice from then finds voice today, as refugees flee nations overwhelmed by desperate poverty and/or unspeakable violence. His voice finds voice through families engaged in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. His voice finds voice in the fish of the Bow River, infected with whirling disease, pleading with humans to stop being careless with God's most life-giving gift, the gift of water.

It only makes sense that we wouldn't like Jeremiah's voice of lament. Lament is by definition unhappy and uncomfortable, and for those of us with religious commitments it does at times feel like we've launched a non-confidence motion against God. But lament is also really, really honest. One of my favourite Christian singer-songwriters is a gentleman named Michael Card, whose songs are Biblical and emotional and deeply honest. An article about his theology of lament says this:

"Think of lament as an essential ingredient of honest faith.... Lament is larger than feeling sorry that you've sinned. It encompasses pain, hurt, confusion, anger, betrayal, despair, and injustice. It goes beyond your personal relationships to consider how all creation groans to be restored to God.

“Jesus understood that lament was the only true response of faith to the brokenness... of the world. It provides the only trustworthy bridge to God across the deep seismic quaking of our lives,”

On any given Sunday, you may come to church glad, mad, or sad. You're likely worshiping with people struggling to count their blessings. Meanwhile, it's certain that somewhere in the world, God's children are going hungry, falling ill, being persecuted, or denouncing each other from pulpits. It takes courage, and faith [to actually hear these laments]. 'We're afraid of other people's pain. Like Job's friends, we're afraid when we don't have answers.. [we're] embarrassed, almost panicky, that there are situations to which we have no answer.'

In closing, Michael Card said he's come to “believe and trust and hope that tears of lament are the missing door, the way into an experience with a God whose depth of compassion we have never imagined.”

And that, for me, is where this all comes together. As we are present, truly present, to the dismay of the world, we become more fully connected to Christ and his personal knowledge of suffering. As we become conscious of suffering, we invite Christ to be a catalyst for life. As we struggle to remain on the high road in the midst of an extremely disrespectful Presidential campaign which dominates the headlines, not just in the USA but everywhere, we invite the Holy Spirit and her wisdom and graciousness, to be a catalyst for change. As we take seriously the groaning of creation, we bring the God of all creation and all creativeness, to be a catalyst for rebirth. As we question whether we, as a congregation, are doing enough to reach out with God's word of love to all people in our community, we offer ourselves to be the catalyst for building something good and worthy and holy. But it all starts, with a willingness to be honest about the world we live in, a willingness to hear lament and to live in the presence of lament for a good long while, to understand its lessons and experience its tears rather than rushing headlong into problem-solving before we have heard and felt the cries.

Lament is a place of patiently experiencing life as it is, to understand the fullness of Christ's promises of a new realm, that place of life as it could be. The key, in a world built on multi-tasking and quick change, is to stay present even when life seems hard and hopeless. The late Fred Rogers – whom the world knew as “Mister Rogers” but was also a trained Presbyterian preacher and musician – made a memorable presentation to a US Senate committee in 1969 in which he emphatically stated his belief that “emotions are both manageable and mentionable” and how important it is to provide safe spaces for people – especially men and boys – to really stay with strong, unpleasant emotions rather than numbing out with booze or by exploding in violence. That, to me, speaks of the power of lament: staying in place, staying real, even when the surroundings are challenging. As followers of Jesus Christ, we embody hope when we are willing to live in the gap between the reality of life as it is now, and God's intention for new life. We teach ourselves and our world that if we can live where lament is expressed, and faced, and owned, we will then find the power to change and be changed. Our call is to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to the pain of the world, even as we trust that the catalytic power of God's holiness is working, even now, to turn those cries of pain into a life of freedom.

As one drawn to depression, I find this call difficult, but true. Jeremiah – we may not welcome your presence, but we need it. No need to turn that frown upside down, much as we would like your life to have been a lot happier. Keep saying what we need to hear, and guide us to the God of abundant promise. Amen.

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