



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 22, 2018  
Jeremiah 23:1-6; PSALM 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; MARK 6:30-34, 53-56

## PIECED TOGETHER IN LOVE

**Jeremiah 23:1-6** *[Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.]*

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."]*

When I was about four, my mother gave me one of my great-grandmother's quilts. It was a beautiful patchwork quilt pieced together using about hundred randomly shaped scraps of fabric. Almost immediately, that blanket became one of my most treasured possessions. For me, that small patchwork quilt was much

more than a common blanket. Somehow, that quilt had the power to transform the mundane experiences of my childhood into moments of extraordinary adventure.

In an instant, the blanket could turn a small patch of grass into a lush rain forest or vast stretch of ocean. When the weather would turn, the quilt could light up my

room with its palette of color. On grey days, I would stare hard into the quilt and wonder where each piece of brilliantly colored fabric had come from and who had given it.

That quilt opened up the world for me, and even as I grew older, the quilt had the power to spark my imagination. When I first stumbled onto the idea of God's remnant, the first image that came to mind was that quilt. Even now, when I think about the remnant of God's flock, I picture that quilt.

Today, Jeremiah tells us about the remnant of God...the promise that God will gather up all of God's people and piece them back together as God intends.

Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah's people were in desperate need of hope. They faced a looming existential crisis brought on by a colossal failure of leadership. They needed every assurance that God would not abandon them in the trials that lay ahead. They needed to know they would not be forgotten, and that eventually, that everything would be okay.

Jeremiah preached comfort to those who needed it, but that's not all he did. Jeremiah also issued grave warnings and searing indictments to the leaders of his day: Stray from God's guiding principles of justice and mercy, and you, leaders, will bear the consequences. Harm God's

people, and you, leaders, will bear their suffering. Protect yourself at the expense of the community, and you, leaders, will be removed. Regardless of the propaganda you tell yourselves and your people, God's ways of love always prevail.

Jeremiah preached during a time of intense political upheaval. He began his ministry in a time of relative peace under the leadership of the reformer king, Josiah. But that period of stability quickly crumbled away. Successive kings whittled away Judah's soul by entering into increasingly dubious agreements with Judah's neighboring superpowers. Eventually, those unholy alliances led to the election of a puppet king sponsored by the Babylonian Empire. Before he was removed from office, Zedekiah would oversee the exile of Judah's elite to Babylon, the fall of Judah, and the total destruction of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah issued warnings to the leaders of his day not as a threat but as a promise and a reminder. God's ways *always* prevail. Those ways of love included practicing mercy and justice for *all* people. Those ways placed special focus on protecting the most vulnerable in society: widows, orphans, and any alien seeking sanctuary within the borders of Judah. Those were God's minimum standards for human interaction and leadership, and anything

short of those minimums was unacceptable. The same is true for us today, some 2,600 years later.

Several times this week, I've used this passage as a filter for the news. At one level, Jeremiah has provided context for the current geopolitical mess we find ourselves in. Many of the problems we face today bear a striking resemblance to problems two millennia ago. Once again, the needs of a few are pitted against the needs of many, rather than working for the needs of all. Once again, political expediency has replaced the hard work of governing. We've been here before, and we'll be here again. That's both a comfort and a frustration as I try to square up our current collective experience with the long arc of human history.

At another level, Jeremiah brings me a sweet sense of satisfaction. Of course, God's ways *always* prevail, and oh goody, I can't wait to watch that unfold from the comfort of my kitchen.

But that particular reaction within myself has been troubling. I've found myself lost in dangerous territory...territory where my motives are driven not by compassion for others but for the need to be right and by the need to make anyone else who disagrees pay. Since when has gospel living been about being right and making others pay? That's the antithesis of what it

means to love God and love neighbor. And that ethic certainly fails to meet the minimum standards of mercy and justice God sets before us. Didn't Jeremiah point out there would be consequences for that kind of behavior?

While Jeremiah might be an interesting news filter, I wonder if it is intended for another purpose: as a mirror peering into the depths of our very souls. Perhaps we are being invited into an intense and honest self-reflection about our own motives, fears, and hopes.

What do you see when you take a long, hard look in that mirror? What is reflected back? Does the image you see want to hold onto grudges and the need to be right, or does the image reflect someone who is humble and curious? Does the image you see foster hostility and fear of others, or is the image open to new people and possibilities? Can you see the image of God reflected back at you? Will you be patient long enough to wait for the image of God to appear?

Paul tells us that through Jesus, all people are joined together into one community. Every one of us is a citizen of God's household. Through Jesus, the dividing wall and the hostility that once separated us has now ceased. Through Christ, a holy temple is being built in us. That holy temple is a dwelling place not just for the

remnant of God, but for the fullness of God throughout all creation.

I wonder if we can we trust each other enough to see the sacred piece of God in one another. I wonder if we can we trust God enough to know that God is working through all people to accomplish God's purposes, even when that seems impossible.

Jesus knew that deep trust in humanity and in God. He saw people for who they were, as beloved children God. He found a way to piece together each person's belovedness into the patchwork of God's kingdom. Jesus met people where they were. He gathered them up, fed and healed them, and sent them on their way

to do the same. That's what mercy and justice look like in practice. That's the same pattern of love we participate in around this table during the Eucharist, and it's the same pattern of love we are called to share with the world.

God knits us together in the womb one by one, piecing all of us together in love. All of creation is gathered together throughout time into this eternal patchwork of God. May the remnant of God who resides deep within each of us transform all of us into the fullness God intends.

AMEN.



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