

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

“Is there no balm in Gilead?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

When Barbara Ehrenreich, author of **Nickel and Dime** and fifteen other books including several best-sellers, was diagnosed with breast cancer, she became fearful and angry. However, early on in what she calls her “cancer career,” Ehrenreich discovered that speaking about those emotions was forbidden in the cancer community. What she found was a community of people—cancer patients, nurses, bloggers, support groups, and vendors—relentlessly promoting a profoundly upbeat response to the disease. Ehrenreich found there was no room for her outrage and despair. She reports being surrounded by pink-ribbon-themed breast cancer products in doctors’ office and when she went on-line to read about the illness—pink-ribbed sweatshirts were everywhere along with lingerie, aprons, shoelaces and socks as well as angel pins, earrings, breast cancer candles, wind chimes and night-lights. Ehrenreich wanted to talk about her sorrow and depression, but was met with overly positive platitudes like these: “When life hands out lemons, squeeze out a smile,” and “Don’t wait for your ship to come in, swim out to meet it.”

Writers, bloggers and cancer survivors spoke about the “gift” of cancer and how it had changed their lives for the better—something Ehrenreich did not experience at all. One cancer survivor wrote, “Cancer is your ticket to your real life. Cancer is your passport to the life you were meant to live.”

Ehrenreich felt alone and isolated with her disease and conflicted because the message was: a positive attitude will help you fight cancer and “win the battle” against the disease. But she could not muster the positive attitude that seemed to be required to fight the disease. Over time, after considerable reading and research, Ehrenreich did not actually believe that her anger and anxiety would affect her prognosis. And her experience with cancer and the unremitting pressure she felt to be positive and upbeat led her to explore the role of positive thinking in our national psyche.

The result of that extensive investigation is Ehrenreich's book BRIGHT-SIDED: HOW THE RELENTLESS PROMOTION OF POSITIVE THINKING HAS UNDERMINED AMERICA.

Ehrenreich's book casts Americans as remarkably positive people—cheerful and upbeat. That, she says, is our reputation and our self-image. She writes that we have come to believe being positive is the key to being successful and prosperous. Ehrenreich writes extensively about the origins of what she calls the “positive thinking movement.” She believes it originated as a response to the harsh theology of New England Calvinists. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Christian Science movement, became prominent suggesting that positive thinking linked to spiritual practices could solve health problems and moral issues. Later, Norman Vincent Peale wrote The Power of Positive Thinking and developed a “bright-sided” theology that continues to be promoted today.

According to Ehrenreich, evangelical megachurches preach the good news that you only have to want something to get it because God wants you to prosper. She says that the medical profession almost prescribes positive thinking for its presumed health benefits, even though those claims are based on dubious research. And even universities have created departments of “positive psychology” and now study the “science of happiness.” But nowhere, Ehrenreich says, is the bright-sided approach more prevalent than in the business community where the refusal to even consider negative outcomes—like mortgage default—contributed directly to the current economic disaster.

Page after page, Ehrenreich's book debunks the false promises upon which the positive thinking movement is based. And she explains how—in her opinion—obsessive positive thinking leads to **personal self-blame** when things go badly, AND **profound denial** on the national level. Her book exposes the pseudoscience and the pseudo-intellectualism that, she says, are the foundations of the positive thinking movement.

In the face of all this positive thinking which, Ehrenreich says, we long to hear and to promote we have today's reading from the Book of Jeremiah...

*My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.
The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.
For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn,
and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?*

We may be a people who are remarkably positive, cheerful and upbeat but we have to wrestle with a Biblical passage that is filled with sorrow, words of mourning and distress from the prophet Jeremiah. This may not be the uplifting, hope-filled passage we want to hear from the Bible today but it is the passage we are given to struggle with and learn from.

Speaking through the prophet, God is sending a message of grief because God's people have turned away from God and violated their covenant with God. God is weeping, according to Jeremiah, because God's people are sinful. Listen to these words, also from the Book of Jeremiah,

*They have held fast to deceit...they do not speak honestly;
no one repents of wickedness, saying
'What have I done!'
All of them turn to their own course, like a horse plunging
headlong into battle (8:5-6).*

God is weeping, Jeremiah says, because God's people are deceitful, dishonest and unrepentant about their own sinfulness. Thousands of years after Jeremiah cried out to the Israelites, we are as a nation, as a people still pursuing self-serving agendas and following our own courses not caring for the needs of the common good, not following the will of God.

*From the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain.
says God through the prophet Jeremiah.
They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush (8:10, 12).*

Given the economic meltdown of the last few years, we can apply those ancient words—"everyone is greedy for unjust gain"—to our own time and note the repercussions. And if we watch television reality shows or even listen to the news, we are confronted by how people today still act shamefully and yet are not ashamed—we still do not know how to blush.

We may be an relentlessly positive and upbeat people—thank you Barbara Ehrenreich for pointing that out—but we must confront the fact that Jeremiah is right....**actions have consequences.** As people of faith, we cannot bright-side our way out of that basic truth: actions have consequences. AND whether we like it or not, judgment is part of our religious tradition. God's judgment comes through loud and clear in today's reading from the Book of Jeremiah. And God's judgment applies not only to the ancient Israelites but to us today.

This passage from Jeremiah challenges us to listen carefully to what God is saying through the words of the prophet, even in Optimistic America. We are given a message that is hard to hear but bold and helpful: your actions matter, you cannot say one thing and do another and be faithful to your promises to be my people and live by my word. Search your hearts, name your sins, and repent.

This is strong stuff. And at this point in the sermon I am tempted to find the silver lining in Jeremiah's words and to bright-side away the sting of his message. I am tempted to dilute the prophet's admonishment, and take the edge off the implications of his scolding and sorrow. I am tempted to do that. And according to Ehrenreich, that is our impulse individually and collectively, in our faith and in our private lives when confronted with difficult news. We want to positive-spin our way out of all discomfort.

I am going to try to resist that impulse, although I recognize it is a powerful feeling within me. Instead I will tell you what I hear in this passage, maybe that will be useful to you.

When I read this painful passage from the Book of Jeremiah I hear God speaking. I hear God speaking through Jeremiah, "My joy is gone, my grief is upon me, my heart is sick" (v. 18). I hear God speaking and I hear God's grief. I hear that God is heartsick. When God says, "For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me" (v. 21), I hear God expressing the hurt of someone who is deeply in love. That is what I hear.

I hear the heartsick sorrow and grief of someone deeply in love.

I hear God deeply in love with us.

In this passage, God speaking through Jeremiah, I hear the words of a passionate God in love with humanity, a God who feels betrayed by those God loves... I hear a God who wants nothing more than to be restored to right relationship with God's people. God is grieving, God is weeping. God wants to be in right relationship with God's beloved sons and daughters—that is what I hear. God wanted the Israelites (and God wants us today) to turn away from sinful behaviors and be restored into right relationship with the divine.

"Is there no balm in Gilead?" asks God through Jeremiah. Gilead, northwest of Judah in ancient Israel, was famous for the balm found there. The balm, believed to have healing properties, was made from the resin of small trees that grew there.

"Is there no balm in Gilead?" God asks through the prophet.

Is there no hope? Is there no healing?

The healing that God seeks is our willingness to name our sins—those things in each of us that block our receiving and expressing God’s love and goodness in the world—God wants us to name our sins and repent. The healing God longs for is for us remove those blocks that keep us from being filled with the spirit of God. And then God longs for us to turn back to God, to restore our relationship with God.

“Is there no balm in Gilead?” That is a stark question...is all hope gone?

Like the in African American spiritual we love to sing, I would say there IS a balm in Gilead. We are not lost or misguided forever, all hope is not gone. We CAN restore a relationship with a God who is in love with us. We can repent and return to a God who repeatedly without ceasing reaches out to us. A God who has promised never to let go.

And so God may weep and mourn because humanity is lost, self-serving and sinful. All true.

BUT God has also said, contradictory as it may seem, my love for you is eternal. And God’s love for us IS eternal—heartfelt, passionate, forever. It is a love that is also honest...calling us to repent and return to right relationship with God.

I believe that in this passage, the prophet Jeremiah models for us a new kind of optimism, a different kind of optimism—one that Ehrenreich does not identify or discuss in her book, and that is HONEST OPTIMISM.

A message we can glean from the passage in Jeremiah is that it is better to be honest than blindly upbeat and optimistic.

But it is better still to combine the two and be a totally honest optimist.

Yes, we must name and repent our sins. But we also know that God’s love is present and eternal. That is not being bright-sided or watering down a difficult message, that is reality. Maybe that is honest optimism.

In his lament about humanity’s sinful nature, Jeremiah writes,

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

And it was that line that Derrick Bell chose as the title of his book about racism in America....And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice.

Bell's entire book outlines the pain and injustice of racial inequality in America....certainly one of our most profound collective sins for which we must continue to repent.

Bell's message is consistent with Jeremiah's message: we have sinned and must repent. That message cannot be bright-sided away.

And yet even Derrick Bell writing about the collective, systemic sin of racism strikes a hopeful note at the very end of his book. It is not simply a positive spin that can remove the indelible stain of racial injustice, not an it's-all-going-to-be-okay cheerfulness that dilutes his powerful message. No. But maybe Bell, who named his book after the Jeremiah passage, was influenced by the honest optimism modeled by Jeremiah. Maybe....because Bells ends his book on racial injustice with the words from the spiritual "Done Made My Vow." Listen to the final verse of that spiritual, which are the final words of Bell's book. They are words of hope in the face of sin and pain—muted and careful, but nonetheless, words of hope in the face of sin and pain...sounds like **honest optimism** to me...

*Done made my vow to the Lord,
And I never will turn back.
Oh, I will go. I shall go.
To see what the end will be.*

Hope is not grounded in superficial platitudes or inspirational feel-good stories. Hope is grounded in the love of God and THAT is deep and eternal. And so let us continue to repent and return to God, believing in and practicing honest optimism.

And because of God's love, we can say with conviction:
*there is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Amen.