

Is There No Balm in Gilead?

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine recounts when his mother died at the age of 56, when he was 33 years old. He was by her side when she died, and as he closed her eyes he said, “a great wave of sorrow surged into my heart.” Tears started to come but he did not cry, keeping his sorrow in check. Even at the burial ground he did not shed a tear. It wasn’t until he woke up the next morning that he wept for her and himself, and writes, “The tears which I have been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested...”

Augustine's heart rested on a pillow of tears. His heart rested on grief. That same morning, he was comforted by Saint Ambrose's “Evening Hymn,” which declares that God will “gently soothe the careworn breast and lull our anxious griefs to rest.”

The death of a loved one grieves the human heart. In the end, Augustine could not stop his grief or tears, though he seems to still struggle with the role of these tears in his spiritual life.

Groaning grief seems to be the ongoing theme in much of our world. Our headlines are filled with sorrow...the ongoing wars in Gaza and the Ukraine are just two examples. And into our world come the words of the Prophet Jeremiah that are soaked with sorrow and lament: “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.” Jeremiah has been called *the weeping prophet*. Tears are his food day and night, but his tears may not be what you think. There is something compelling, something honest, something real and raw about Jeremiah’s lamentations. *Within his sorrow and his tears resides a seed of hope.*

And so, Jeremiah is not just a bearer of bad news. His tears are rooted in a hope in God. His warnings of doom are always followed by promises of hope. For the most part, the prophetic ministry of

grief is hopeful. Those who do not grieve rarely experience the hope which can follow. In Augustinian fashion, tears form a pillow and on them, hope rests. Tears are a part of the texture of hope.

One of the most meaningful experiences in the life of the Quaker John Woolman was when he visited English Friends at London Yearly Meeting in 1772. He had traveled from America by ship, in steerage, so that he could identify with the poor. When he had landed, not bothering to bathe or put on clean clothes, he went directly to Devonshire House for Yearly Meeting. The cultivated Friends of England thought that they had a crank on their hands, and so their first concern when he arrived was to try and get rid of him. One Friend arose in Meeting and spoke, suggesting that Woolman might now consider his mission accomplished so that he could feel free to go home. The sensitive Woolman was deeply hurt and sat in meeting weeping openly.

After sitting for a long period of time weeping, Woolman finally stood and said that he did not yet feel released from his ministerial

visit to England, and then delivered a message that convinced all present that he did, indeed have a ministry to share. When he sat down, the Friend who suggested that he return home to America confessed that he was wrong, and expressed his support to Woolman, asking him to remain in England as long as he felt led to stay.

John Woolman's heart was wounded, and he expressed his hurt by weeping. His weeping, however, *cleansed the lens of his spiritual perception*, and he then delivered a most meaningful message to all who would listen.

Peter Gomes, the former minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, was the author of *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, which turned out to be his last book. In it he writes, "Hope is not the opposite of suffering; suffering is the necessary antecedent of hope" because in and through suffering, hope manifests. "A hope worth having is forged upon the anvil of adversity...Hope is the stuff that gets us through and beyond when the worst that can happen happens."

I cannot write and speak on grieving and hope without thinking of my wife Elizabeth, and her book, *A Migrant with Hope*. As one listens to the terribly misleading political advertisements on television, one cannot help but think that immigrants are the source of all of America's problems. They are an easy target. They have no lobbyists in Washington, nor do they have money to contribute to politicians. In her book, Elizabeth quoted President Reagan's last public speech as President. He said, "It is bold men and women, yearning for freedom and opportunity, who leave their homelands and come to a new country to start their lives over. They believe in the American dream. And over and over, they make it come true for themselves, for their children and for others. They give more than they receive...."

Elizabeth continues, "I am grateful that my parents came to America from Mexico seeking a better life. I have been the beneficiary of the new life they sought. I am a migrant who still clings to the hope that was instilled within me as a very young girl. I

feel confident that the heart of America is bigger than the anti-immigrant rhetoric that is all around us. May God give us the strength and courage to become a better more loving, and more open people, remembering the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew: ‘For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me. I assure you, as often as you did it for the least among you, you did it for me.’”

There is a quotation from Dan White Junior that is making its way around the internet. It is from his book, *Love Over Fear*. He writes: "When you live in Culture War Mode there is always a battle to fight, a side to take, and people to fear. When you live in God's Kingdom there's always a stranger to welcome, a neighbor to befriend, and an enemy to love."

And so where do we find hope amidst the grief that Jeremiah says "is beyond healing?" We find hope in feeding the hungry...giving

**drink to the thirsty...welcoming the stranger...clothing the
naked...comforting the ill and visiting those in prison. Our hope can
be found in ministering to the least among us, who, in turn, minister
to us.**