

08.16.26 ~ Pentecost 12
“Nothing Can Separate Us”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Prophecy

Jeremiah 5:3, 5, 7-10, 18 ^{TLB}

Pew Bible 652

³ O Lord, you are looking for faithfulness. You have tried to get them to be honest, for you have punished them, but they won't change! You have destroyed them, but they refuse to turn from their sins. They are determined, with faces hard as rock, not to repent.

⁵ I will go now to their leaders, the men of importance, and speak to them, for they know the ways of the Lord and the judgment that follows sin. But they too had utterly rejected their God.

⁷ How can I pardon you? For even your children have turned away and worship gods that are not gods at all. I fed my people until they were fully satisfied, and their thanks was to commit adultery wholesale and to gang up at the city's brothels.

⁸ They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's mate. ⁹ Shall I not punish them for this? Shall I not send my vengeance on such a nation as this? ¹⁰ Go down the rows of the vineyards and destroy them! But leave a scattered few to live. Strip the branches from each vine, for they are not the Lord's.

¹⁸ But I will not completely blot you out. So says the Lord.

Leader: These Are God's Words.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

Romans 8:31-39 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 983

Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love

³¹ What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? ³² Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? ³³ Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. ³⁴ Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

³⁵ Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁶ (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") ³⁷ No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all

creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Leader: These Are Apostle Paul's Words.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, you tell us nothing can separate us, but we know our sinful thoughts and deeds and succumb to the guilt and shame of them. Help us to surrender to your mercy and grace. We are grateful to be together to worship and lean upon each other's faith as well as your teachings, so please reveal yourself in these Scriptures. Let us be open to a new message of assurance. We love Jesus and are grateful for his sacrifice and salvation. Let us listen closely again to your servants Jeremiah and Paul to apply their words to our own lives. Speak through this message and messenger. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Happy Sunday! Yes, we are here again, but hopefully only a few more times. As we gather more information, there are options, and we'll take them to the church fairly soon. Thank you for your prayers and please keep praying for our Mission Center partners, events, our church, your pastor, and the team.

Were you able to ponder the last two weeks' confusing passage from Paul as it relates to your own struggles and confessions? Or did you decide it was too much word salad to even try? At breakfast yesterday, we talked about a new book I'm reading on neuroscience, the brain, and the Bible, called "Holy Noticing" by Charles Stone. It gave us a structure for contemplation and quiet meditation; rather than letting our minds ruminate on the past or the future, we stay more in the present. That advice fit in nicely with the last two weeks' sermons. One cannot responsibly choose between the want to do's or the don't want to do's Paul speaks of quickly. So, are we and you, specifically, pausing long enough (maybe only 20 minutes) to notice holy moments? That's the point of my monthly article, Kairos Moments. Where do we see God

working, appearing, or waking us up through the Holy Spirit? And then what will we do about it?

You see these passages over the summer have been about people who are **not** looking or noticing where God is working or present. As we've learned, the people have sinned and turned their backs on God. Sound like today? Israel, the Northern Kingdom, had a change of heart and eventually repented, but Judah, the Southern Kingdom, had not. These early chapters in Jeremiah are a collection of oracles (defined as messages from a prophet) that tell us about Yahweh's imminent judgment upon Judah. As Yahweh's spokesperson, Jeremiah warns his nation that Yahweh will judge by inviting a political enemy who will come with clouds, whirlwind, and eagles from the north (4:5-18). Chapter 4 darkly describes the physical and emotional crises brought on by the coming disaster.

In today's chapter 5, we have a situation similar to Abraham's negotiation with God from Genesis 18 about Sodom and Gomorrah, where he asks (*paraphrased*), "if I can find 50, then 40, then 30, then 10, then 5 honest, upright men, will you spare the city where my family lives?" Jeremiah **also** asks for his people to be spared judgment for their sins and God answers him: "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city (Jeremiah 5:1 ^{TLB})."

But, of course, we know that Jeremiah could not find that person. Last week, he called them a "foolish and senseless people" who had hard hearts and were stubbornly pursuing their ungodly priorities and idol worship. Like **we** so often do, Jeremiah continued to **negotiate** with God.

He proposed that perhaps only these “foolish and senseless” poor and downtrodden were hardened due to their circumstances, so he would go to their more educated and affluent leaders to find the upright to justify mercy. But the rich were audacious and pompous, prone to selfish promotion. Repentance did not exist in their lifestyles or imaginations. Jeremiah seeks mercy in their punishment despite their differences, but their approaches to Yahweh are the same. Both rich and poor broke away from the Master’s yoke, or as we’ve been calling it, broken their righteous relationship with God. So, both groups of foolish and senseless people will be punished by this predator Babylon and Assyria. Like lions, wolves, and leopards, they attack and devour the unworthy.

However, it is in God’s character and his main attribute to be merciful so he will metaphorically prune the dead wood of the wild vines, allowing some to survive and grow. He will preserve a remnant for redemption, much like he saved Abraham and Sarah from the angels of death in Sodom and Gomorrah. The enemy nation in Jeremiah was instructed by God to destroy the buildings, steal their food and flocks, but must not “blot them out (Jer. 5:10).” Some must be left to live, and something must be left to live upon. God had mercy for his people. That is our hope for this world as well.

With Jesus, we too are shown undeserved mercy. There is punishment for sin, yet in repentance and redemption through the cross, we are spared. Paul reminded us in Romans 7 that because of Christ, we are no longer slaves to that sin: “²⁸ And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them . . . ^{30b} And having called them, he gave them right standing with

himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory (Romans 8:28, 30 ^{NLT}).” As the apostle Paul proclaims, if we are called and have God’s glory within us because of Jesus Christ, how can we **not** be transformed!? This is the excitement we hear in Paul’s letter to the Romans. He celebrates this wonderful news that he, the worst among sinners by his own profession, has been saved and is glorified with God’s presence within. Wow! Isn’t that how we felt at our baptism? Or our second birth? Do we still feel that now? Perhaps not, and we can’t blame our age. If anything, we should be feeling even more excited about seeing Jesus eventually. Who or what has stolen or distracted that enthusiasm?

As is happening today, Jesus’ and Paul’s critics were doing some damage to the early church formation, so Paul uses his theological understanding of both the God of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus who he met on the Damascus Road to testify that believers are new beings, impervious to the enemy. “³³ Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? (Romans 8:33 ^{NLT}).” We can no longer be separated from God’s love, provision, or grace. Now, to me, that is an amazing assurance in the midst of crisis, danger, or struggle. I am here today to help you hear Paul’s persuasive voice. Many people take religion very seriously. The institutions are important to sustain our spiritual disciplines, Biblical intelligence, and a fellowship and evangelism of faith. But what I hear Paul preaching in these verses of chapter 8 is a renewal of enthusiasm for Jesus’ sacrifice and salvation. Paul is almost ecstatic and cannot understand why others are not! His past is a lot to have overcome, so I get it. He not only knows Jesus as his Savior, but he knows his future, even though most of it will be in prison, and he is not afraid. “^{38b} Neither death

nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. ³⁹No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38b-39 ^{NLT}).”

I cannot state this any better than the apostle Paul, and I think we need his words in today’s world, our own communities, churches, and within our families more than ever. He wrestled with sin and we are better for looking at it closely in our own lives, but the main message he shares is God’s love. Can we feel this right relationship? Do we notice his love through Jesus? Do we observe others practicing acts of loving kindness and mercy? We are one with the triune God so please, let us live that way and be his examples to the insolent, foolish, and senseless world. Keep praying, keep asking, keep studying, keep serving, and keep coming back to worship. Amen. ||

Please pray with me: Thank you Lord for the guidance you give us through your Scriptures each week. May we never forget that you have called us into relationship and glory. Help us to stay close to you through our spiritual disciplines of contemplation, confession, study, and prayer. Open our eyes to holy moments of transformation and your presence in the world. Remind us that nothing can separate us from you unless we allow it. Help us to feel your love and to express it to others every day in some way. We pray these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.