

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Good Grief!"  
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World Communion Sunday

The Bible is a wonderful book that addresses so many different seasons and situations in life. It is not simply about how to be healthy and wealthy and wise. Nor does its Author suggest that happiness and holiness are the only parts of life. The Bible also records the most difficult times, the times of loss, of grieving, of devastation, of destruction, of hurting, of confusion, of deep depression and of wondering.

Nothing tests our faith and trust in God more than our times of suffering and loss, or simply being with others through their suffering and losses. I was just in the nursing home last night with a couple and their mom who was supposed to be dying. We had a prayer and she woke up and we had a brief conversation and another prayer. Life never quite works out the way we expect, for good and for ill.

Jeremiah lived well after the tempestuous times of the sacking of Samaria, the northern kingdom of Israel, which was destroyed and never rebuilt. He also was predicting, prophesying about and living through the time when Jerusalem was sacked, burned, not a stone left on another. He couldn't take in the devastation around him, but still was able to write and/or dictate to his secretary. He compared Jerusalem to a beautiful princess who at one time had won all kinds of beauty pageants, but now was a sad and lonely widow who knows only pain. The young men of the royal court were like moose who could find nothing to eat, so went away without hope and without direction.

Why would God allow such a thing? We hear this a lot when good people suffer and die unexpectedly. We hear this when some of our expectations are dashed, when lives are cut short, people are left without friendship and resources. But Jeremiah doesn't wind up there. He brings all his grieving and all his loss back to God. He admits he is bitter and resentful, as we should when we recognize the same in ourselves. But he also trusts in the faithfulness of God, even after seeing the Temple burned and the city destroyed, he trusts in the God who takes him through every day of his life. He was the first one to sing "Great is Thy Faithfulness, morning by morning new mercies I see, All I have needed, Thy Hand hast provided, Great is Thy

Faithfulness, Lord, unto me.” Long before Tom Chisholm penned that hymn in 1923, and Billy Graham often used it, Jeremiah lived it, in the midst of much that hurt, much that confounds, much that oppresses.

We live in such an age. The Judeo-Christian heritage and truths which undergirded society and laws is eroded to the point that many roads experienced when Igor washed them out or loaded them up with boulders. No longer can society point to Christian values, ethics, social or sexual mores. On the contrary, trying to uphold these things can land you in court or human rights tribunals; even charged with hate crimes. We live in an age which protects many religions from degradation and disrespect. Christianity, on the other hand, seems to be open to vile commentaries, open ridicule, portrayed often by the media as simply institutionalized abuse and cultural genocide. How do we deal with the loss of the church being a positive place to go culturally? How do we deal with any comments from friends or family, when you share you are going to church, , such as, “Why would you want to do that? Why waste your time in such a way?” This is the age in which we live. We have lost much as a church.

We have also lost much in our congregations. With everyone working outside the home, men, women, young people, we find many fewer workers in our traditional groups in the church. We find people who self-identify as Presbyterians but rarely if ever attend worship. Now this has happened as long as there has been a church, but its frequency is increased. To come to worship, you have to choose against many sports events, charity fund raisers, children's sports and many other activities which long ago, and not so long ago, would have been prohibited on Sunday morning. But those days are gone.

We have all lost much in our personal lives. We have lost loved ones to death. We have lost relationships due to many kinds of dysfunctions, sins, mistakes and pride. We have lost jobs, prestige, hopes, dreams, possessions. We have lost health and happiness, at times.

We suffer many losses. To deny such is to deny our experiences in life and the realities that shape us. Some have said that how we deal with our losses determines how well we mature as adults, as Christians, as followers of Jesus. How well we handle our losses is a measure of our spiritual growth.

And what can we say about this, except what the disciples said to the Lord in the gospel passage we read, "Increase our faith." Jesus simply replies that a little goes a long way, just like a small seed brings forth a giant tree.

He also says that we should simply seek to serve, and be content in our serving. But many of us have difficulty with this. We prefer to be the master, not the slave. We prefer to be the captain of our destiny, not the sailor mopping the deck.

Yet when we come to the Lord's Table, we acknowledge humbly that we cannot feed ourselves spiritually. We need God's food. We need God's people to help us receive that food. We need to be honest. Jeremiah says, "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." This does not mean that we should all be loners off in our own corners. It means quite the opposite. We should draw near to God in prayer. We should draw near to others with the real struggles of our lives, and risk saying to those we can trust what is really going on inside. Maybe you feel lonely, even though you are surrounded by people every day. Maybe you feel depressed inside although your face does not show it. Maybe you are angry or resentful, and you think that others do not know this about you, but in fact they do. Whatever is going on in your life, bring that to God and God's people. Bring that here to the Lord's Table, where he can wrap his arms of love around you and care for you. And if we can help be a part of that care and healing, I'm sure the Minister, elders and leaders here would do the same for you.

The good grieving we do leads us back to the Lord, and to people we can trust, whether we have known God a long time, or a short time, whether we are young or not so young. We need each other.

Paul is often reminding young pastor Timothy of this fact. He encouraged Tim to be thankful for his grandmother and mother who both helped him in his faith in God. Paul encouraged Tim to not be scared of all the challenges in the church he faced as a young minister. He told him to remember to be courageous. I wonder if we shouldn't pray more often for courage. Courage to love. Courage to be honest. Courage to care. The Holy Spirit does give us power and love and self-discipline. We can make it through whatever losses come our way. We can choose to serve, even if we are suffering, as Paul was suffering in jail. Paul said he didn't want to be ashamed of being a Christian even if others were ashamed of his being a Christian. He was

convinced that everything he had devoted to God would be protected by God until he goes to be with God. Do you believe that? Everything you devote to God, all that you give away, in time, money, effort, conversation, debate, everything you devote to your spirituality is guarded by God and cannot be stolen from you.

As we come to the Table of the Lord, we can come confident that our God knows our needs and wants to minister to us. In those short moments where we hold the elements of bread and wine, let us remember to thank God for what He has already brought us through, to ask God for courage to face ourselves and our issues and then courage to reach out to others, in the local and global mission which is uniquely ours to carry out.

No one can minister like you can. I can't. Dave can't. No one can reach all the people you can reach. Come to the table and be reminded of the sacred trust you have as a member of the royal family, as a child of God, as a priest leading others to the One that you yourself receive, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.