

“Uniting our Hearts and Voices to End Child Poverty”

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

I'll admit this seems like an odd text for Children's Sabbath. For starters, children are only mentioned once and it is about setting their teeth on edge and their parents eating sour grapes and secondly, the first part of this text is really disturbing with all its talk about bringing evil and people dying for their own sins.

This is not one of those texts which brings us peaceful easy feelings. There is no Jesus loves the little children feel good moment to be found here in this particular prophetic text. This text is down and dirty, harsh and brutal. And in no way does this text let us off the hook. It grabs our attention. It forces us to pay attention to what is going on around us.

Okay, now that I say it out loud. I'm going to take back everything I just said. This is the perfect text for Children's Sabbath for all the reasons I just mentioned. Because, let's be honest usually when it comes to our children and youth, more often than not, we say things like it is better to see them than to hear them. When it comes to our children and youth, we adults tend to simplify and sanitize everything, trying to create a photo shopped picture of perfection while ignoring the dark realities many of our children and youth face today...gun violence in school, poverty rates sky-rocketing, programs like Head Start and WIC

being underfunded, health insurance markets flooded with uncertainty...and this is just naming a few. All these very adult problems have become reality for too many of the children and youth in our community, in our nation and in our world.

Yes, I'll be the first to admit that our Children's Sabbath celebration, our intentionally taking the time to learn more about the urgent problems facing our nation's children, our lifting up of the sacred texts and teachings which call us to love and protect children, texts which call us to respond to the needs of our children with outreach and advocacy, I'll be the first to admit that our Children's Sabbath celebration, a time for us to recommit ourselves to missions and ministries designed to improve the lives of children is a soap box issue for me.

I admit this for many reasons, one being that I volunteer at Northside, our local elementary school and it breaks my heart to see on Friday afternoons, the brown plastic Kroger bags bundled with food lined up against the school office's walls, did you hear that, I said walls, not wall. It breaks my heart to know that these bags will be slipped into various backpacks for families who rely on them to help feed their family each weekend. It also breaks my heart to know that this year, one of the grants approved again by our trustees was for funding to pay off lunch room debt at Northside, and that this is at least the third year funding for this grant has been approved.

On Thursday, I called the School Board office to find out what this quarter's lunch room debt was for Northside. The woman said, "Oh, you called on a good day. It is only \$28.70, not too bad." I thought to myself, "No, a good day will be when I call up there to ask this question and you tell me, the amount is zero, a good day will be when these funds are not needed now nor will they ever be needed because such things such as school lunch room debt does not exist.

Another reason Children's Sabbath is a soap box issue for me, is because my background is in Child Development. I know how critical a healthy and safe environment is to a child's development, how needed a strong educational foundation is for every child. It breaks my heart to know each and every day some of the light found within a child's smile gets extinguished before it ever has a chance to shine due to circumstances which are beyond this little person's control.

One of the stories the Children's Defense Fund shared this year illustrates this perfectly: It was shared by Alan who is age 10. He says: "My dad did not have enough money to buy his car license. So the cop took his car away. He can't drive anymore. Now it is harder for him to get to work, and sometimes he is late. So he does not get as much money as he used to get. Now we have to go walking everywhere. We get tired. Our life is harder. We can't get as much food. Sometimes my mom has only beans, and I don't like beans so I just don't eat. Sometimes I get hungry. It's harder for me to go to sleep and I'm tired in the

morning. When I grow up, I was thinking to be a doctor. But now I think that I won't be able to do anything, because I won't even have food or shelter."

Let me say that again: When I grow up, I was thinking to be a doctor. But now I think that I won't be able to do anything, because I won't even have food or shelter." These words are spoken by a 10 year old boy in the United States one of the richest nations in the world, in 2019.

I'll let that sink in for a moment.

I have no shame in admitting that on this particular Sunday every year I pull a little bit of pastor's privilege by using this pulpit to raise awareness for issues facing the children and youth of our community, of our nation and of our world for all the reasons I have previously mentioned but more importantly, I stand up here on my soap box and bring our attention to the despair, to the hurt, to the injustices so many of our children and youth face because I am a person of faith.

I am called, we are called to take care of the least of these. I am called, we are called to look out for the vulnerable in our midst by being a voice for the voiceless. As a person of faith, I am called, we are called to bring healing and wholeness for all of God's children, both young and old, so that God's Kingdom will be fully realized here on earth. And celebrating Children's Sabbath helps us to

do just that. It reminds me, remind us that this sacred call which we have all embraced as followers of Jesus Christ, is not a one time thing. It is not something we can pick up when it is convenient for us. This call to care, this call to nurture, this call to make justice and show mercy is a part of who we are. It is how we live out our understanding of our faith as disciples of Christ. It is how we show our love for God by loving the least of these as ourselves.

Caring for the vulnerable is a deeply held Biblical value found both within the Old and New Testament. From Genesis to Revelation, there are verses upon verses, laid out in detail of how we are to care for the widows and orphans, how we are to welcome the refugee, how we are to welcome the little children, made in the image of God. This is the core message of what Jesus taught and preached. Being a people of justice and hope is the very foundation upon which we build our faith...simply because it reflects the very character and nature of our God, our God who is steadfast in love, who is generous in all things and who is faithful from generation to generation. We don't have to look any further than this Jeremiah text to know that this is true.

Here is why I say this...The context for this passage is failure and trauma. Jeremiah's community is broken and torn apart. Some are in exile. Some are living in extreme poverty. Most of Jeremiah's community have lost everything. And as the community looks at the despair and brokenness surrounding them, everyone,

everyone is also watching the light of hope become extinguished before it even has a chance to shine.

And then Jeremiah comes on to the scene with a word from God for the people of God. He shares once again a few of the words from his call, given to him by God to be a prophet for the people. He talks about building up new beginnings for all of God's children. He speaks a word of comfort, reminding the people of a radiant future where all are restored to wholeness. Jeremiah becomes a voice for the voiceless as he speaks of God's peace becoming a reality for all of God's children. Through these words, Jeremiah invites the people to a renewal of the covenant with their God, reminding them that they are in relationship with their God, calling them to become the people God created them to be by living a life full of knowledge that God was in their midst.

Jeremiah uses the covenant to remind the people of their connection to each other and to the next generation. This covenant which goes back all the way to Abraham has the power to unite and renew the people. This covenant with God, this covenant with one another, when taken seriously, strengthens their vision as a community. It does this by reminding them that seeing to the wellbeing of all the community, young and old, poor and rich, male and female, seeing to the wellbeing of all the community is the very foundation of their calling as the people of God here on Earth.

Jeremiah uses this word of covenant to remind the people, to remind us as modern day people of faith that "the very character of God is steadfast in love, generous in grace, faithful from generation to generation. Jeremiah uses the word of covenant to remind the people that the very nature of their faith is relationship-based, connecting us to one another in amazing life giving ways.

Jeremiah reminds the people of Israel, reminds us of the covenant which we entered into when we embraced our call to become prophets for God's people. We are called to share the good news, to show this world that God is still at work, bringing about healing and wholeness for all of God's people. As people bound together by the covenant of our faith as disciples of Christ, we are called to show this world that God is still speaking, that God is still working. Jeremiah reminds the people that this world does not have the last word, that God is still calling people like you and me to bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's children.

You see, God has heard the children's cries. And in response to those cries, God is sending forth prophets, is sending forth people like you and me to bring comfort and hope to this broken and hurting world. Because God will not stop until all of God's children have enough to eat, until all of God's children have a roof over their heads. God will not stop bringing about healing and wholeness until all of God's children's lights shine bright with hope and love. God will not stop

making justice and showing mercy until all of God's children no longer live in fear.

Because that's just who God is. God is loving and slow to anger, God is generous and gracious, God is faithful from generation to generation. And God has called us, to be in covenant with one another. God has called us to renew our commitment to caring not only for our own children, but for all of God's children. God has called us as the people of God to unite our hearts, to unite our voices to end child poverty so that no child's smile ever gets extinguished before it ever has a chance to shine.

Just like Jeremiah's words to the people of Israel, today we as modern day people of faith are being asked to make a commitment to the next generation. We are being asked to make a renewal of our covenant promises, promises which bind us together as one as the Body of Christ here on Earth, promises which tell us that if one part of the Body is hurting, we are all hurting, promises which give us the strength to unite our voices and heart so that one day God's Kingdom will truly be fully realized here on Earth.

This renewal of our covenantal promises to each other, this renewal of our commitment to the children of our community, commitment to the children of our nation and world is once again an opportunity for us to practice what we preach as

a community of faith bound together by love. It becomes an opportunity to show this world where power and might rule, where our children grow up way too fast because of all the adult stuff they are dealing with, it becomes an opportunity for us to ask ourselves this very important question: “If God’s relational covenant is truly written on our hearts, truly revealed in our lives as people of faith, would we not, in our rich nation, ensure that children have the food, family income, health care, and other basic things they need to live out their lives with the health and wholeness God intends? Would we not work to create a world in which no child dies from preventable malnutrition and disease, in which no woman bears a child for calamity, in which every young person is guided on the path to a hopeful future full of promise?

I don’t have all the answers to these questions and I know that this conversation about ending child poverty is so much larger than just one sermon on a particular Sunday but it is my hope, it is my prayer, that today and all days we continue to become a community of faith bound together by relationship, bound together by covenant, as we live out our mission to care for all of God’s children so that the light of every child’s smile has the opportunity to shine bright and fill this world with hope and joy. Amen.