

Broken Apart by Mercy—10th Sunday after Pentecost

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[Jeremiah 23:23-29](#)

[Psalm 82](#)

[Luke 12:49-56](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

Jesus' words are harsh today. Certainly, in the era to which we belong, I'm sure we are feeling quite done with division. We would love a little peace, peace in our politics and public life here, peace in Ukraine... But Jesus says he comes to divide. And his words are echoed by the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah says the word of God is a fire that cleanses. God's word is a hammer that divides hard things, even rock.

If you remember what we were talking about last Sunday: Scripture was reminding that God is always calling us back from our self-reliance, our over-reliance on our common sense, and back to the pathways of trust. The ones who do that calling—that bringing back—to the pathway of trust, are prophets.

Jeremiah the prophet lived while God's people were under siege by the Babylonians. And there were lots and lots of prophets who told the king what he wanted to hear. Jeremiah, however, told it straight. He delivered a bitter pill—and he got in trouble. Trust only God, Trust not your riches, your armies, your other “gods”—Jeremiah said.

Jesus too, though certainly we confess he is God's Son, God becoming flesh for us, Jesus too was a prophet, calling God's people back to trust. And when the prophets called people to step away from their common sense, and when we in our era do the same, you are going to get some resistance.

And so, prophet-Jesus, like prophet-Jeremiah, reminds us—when you encounter God's Word, it is not all just fluffy sheep and confirmations that we're A-OK, as is. Jesus and Jeremiah say: God's Word is a hammer, a fire—a dividing, splitting, purifying force. //

I guess the question really is: What is God's Word, that does this hammering and burning? Someone recently was in my office, and we were chatting, and they asked me bluntly a similar question. As Christians we answer, of course, that God's Word is, Jesus, is Christ. But that doesn't always clarify things. **God's Word, spoken in and through Christ—I said, is trust and mercy.**

Jeremiah calls God's people back to trust only God. Trust that God made this amazingly complex, billions of years old, universe—its atoms, its stars—its creatures and its cultures. Trust that God is at the base of all things. And trust that at the base of God, is only mercy.

The most divisive thing about Jesus is certainly his death. God chooses there to be powerless. God chooses there to forgive. God chooses mercy. And not only does God choose mercy, Over and over God's word calls us as well to reflect that mercy. God's hammering, divisive Word is mercy.

It's not an accident that we have heard in the Psalm today about God's justice. God here in this Psalm is imagined as the judge above all judges. God is above all other imaginary gods, be they wealth or comfort or health. And here, God's ruling of ultimate justice is simply mercy:

Save the weak and the orphan;
 defend the humble and needy;
rescue the weak and the poor;
 deliver them from the power of the wicked.

These kinds of commands, to have mercy, are startlingly common in the Hebrew Bible. In my count the term "orphan" is used over 30 times in such commands. "Orphan" is an abbreviation, a cultural relic of the biblical era. Orphans were those who could not support themselves. Just like the humble, needy, weak and poor.

In our culture, generally, the needy, weak and poor—the guys out with cardboard signs on the corner of Dixwell Ave. and Skiff St.—are not thought of as orphans, as helpless children. But are regarded as themselves quite wicked, or just stupid and dangerous! Those who are poor, we think deep in our hearts, surely must have done something to deserve it.

These rather unmerciful thoughts are not that far under the surface. Once, when I was doing ministry in and around Philadelphia. We were having a conversation in my congregation about race and about class. A woman asked, "Hey, I grew up poor. I worked two jobs and pulled myself up. Why don't *they* just move away and get a job like I did?" The underlying idea here is that poor people are broken, and choose to remain poor on purpose, and not because their families, their education, their city, their situation—is broken.

Well, we say with a shrug, they shouldn't have used those drugs... shouldn't have had the child so young... the government coddles them...

God doesn't care about who deserves what, in our little cultural game of keeping score. In fact, God doesn't keep score. If God kept score, we would all, most certainly, be damned. That's literally what the word "grace" means. God's score is:

Save the weak and the orphan;
 defend the humble and needy;
rescue the weak and the poor;
 deliver them from the power of the wicked.

But, as Jeremiah and Jesus remind us today: God's Word is a hammer, it is a fire. God's mercy is a hammer and it is fire: it smashes apart our defenses, our excuses, it burns away our protective coating. And that is going to tick some people off.

It seems, even today, that really, deep down, people still would prefer a vengeful God. Poor people must somehow deserve it, we say. Even those folks, those *liberal* folks, who would never admit it. think this way too. They too, like their right-leaning counterparts, thirst for justice by vengeance. The poor, weak people who were duped into storming the capital on January 6? Monsters, lock them up. Politicians who once before, or still support, claims of election fraud? Evil, they would say, unforgivable.

I didn't mean to get so "political" here, But the point is this—God's Word does not play favorites in American politics. God's Word breaks it apart, breaks apart our biases, our "leanings," it burns up our blind spots. *All* are deserving of God's ultimate mercy. And that includes you! That, right there, is bound to divide *many*. There is no hiding, no sugar-coating. What we call good news, what we call mercy, **the world calls folly**.

I realize that Jesus' is talking about families being divided, which is a vivid and sort of glum image. But in Jesus' time people did not have the same kind of sense of individualism that we have. And a family then was itself like the smallest unit in society. You received your identity from your family, you're a father because you have a son, you're a wife because you have a husband. But we would probably say the smallest unit is the individual. And just as Jesus says this family unit will be divided by God's Word, of self-giving mercy. I think it's fair for us, now, to see ourselves, as individuals, as the target of this hammering, burning Word.

So, today, let yourself be divided, let yourself be split apart.

God, who is nothing but mercy, shown to us so achingly clear in Jesus on the cross, God is hammering away those rocky parts of us —that are so in love with our own problems and our own sense of superiority. So, be split apart a little today by God's mercy. The Word comes not to placate us, to say peace when there is no peace. But to open, and soften.

Be broken apart, and let the unconditional love of Christ slowly seep in.

Amen.