



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
24 November 2019
Sermon: Breadcrumbs
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Luke 23:33-43

Jeremiah 23:1-6

23 Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. ²Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

⁵The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 23:33-43

³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [³⁴Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned

justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.”⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

She went down South with one question: Why do people suffering on the front lines of ecological catastrophe still support policies and platforms that hurt the environment? Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild spent five years in the Louisiana bayou country during the height of the Tea Party movement.¹ She spoke with supporters like a man named Mike, who lost his home when malpractice by a drilling company caused a 26-acre wide sinkhole to open in the middle of his community, literally swallowing his home. Mike blames the company but he refuses to vote for anyone who promises to regulate it, because he trusts the government even less than big corporations. She spoke to another man named Lee, who under the direction of his manufacturing company, repaired pipes carrying lethal chemicals that eventually made their way into nearby waterways, devastating local marine life. Over time, Lee himself grew so sick from the chemicals he had to stop work, but rather than admit liability for the toxic chemical exposure that caused his illness, the company fired him for absenteeism. Lee also votes against regulation, claiming that would mean his tax dollars going to welfare recipients.

In the state devastated by hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon leak, with some of the worst rates of education, poverty, and life expectancy in the country, Hochschild met white, middle- and working-class residents guided by a deep, emotional story, a “feels-as-if story,” that made them support policies that went against their own interests. This deep story is

¹ See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. (New York: The New Press, 2016).

not true. It is a myth, founded on grief and anger. But as you listen to it, I am sure that it will sound familiar, because today we hear echoes of it every time we turn on the news.

I'm going to quote Arlie Hochschild as she narrates this mythological, deep story: "You are patiently [sitting] in a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. You are situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male...Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line...The American Dream is a dream of progress – the idea that you're better off than your forebears just as they superseded their parents before you...You've suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire, and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are – a badge of honor... [But wait.] Has the economy come to a strange standstill? Is my company doing okay? Will I get a raise this year? Are there good jobs for us all? Or just a few? Will we be in line forever?"

Hochschild goes further, showing how the deep story gets more explicitly racist: "[But] Look! You see people *cutting in line ahead of you!* You're following the rules. They aren't. As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches...These are opportunities you'd have loved to have had in your day...It's not fair."² And so the dream just over the hill recedes from view, as you find yourself trapped, waiting in line all your working life.

² Ibid., 136-137.

[to stairs] This story is full of deep historical amnesia, class division, and racist tropes, but it is nonetheless the lens through which large portions of our nation make their political choices today. Both parties of our country have helped create and manipulate it for their own gain. And it has led people to participate in their own oppression. The myth of the stolen American dream keeps leaders in place as they hurt the very people who elected them, just as it motivates refugees of environmental collapse like Mike and Lee to vote for deregulation time and again.

At the end of the Gospel of Luke, we meet another man caught up in the very system that dehumanizes him. Jesus is crucified between two other victims of Roman torture and capital punishment, and “One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding [Jesus] and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’” How ironic? This man joining the very leaders and soldiers who hung him on a cross in mocking Jesus, his fellow victim in crucifixion. He has bought into the Roman system, where might makes right, where power is defined in the ability to put another to shame and to death. A victim of this imperial system, he is also a proponent of it.³

In what ways, do you and I participate in the systems and ways of being in this world that hurt us, that spoil or ruin or oppress us? Two decades ago, Presbyterian theologian Wendy Farley found that she had lost the ability to read, after suffering an unspeakable trauma in her personal life.⁴ In the midst of this shattering grief, through prayer and contemplation, she plunged deeply into her soul, asking this very question: how do I participate in my own trauma? Not, how did I cause or deserve my trauma, because, of course, the earth-shattering griefs that we experience

³ In this exegesis of the text, I am indebted to Patrick Oden’s commentary on the passage in Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 3*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 507-509.

⁴ See Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). The following is a summary of chs. 4 & 5, p. 55-94.

are not simply doled out to us as punishment. But rather, she asked, how does our wounds result in further self-destructive behaviors in the midst of hardship.

The answers she found are some of the most illuminating, and some of the most subtle, analyses of brokenness I have ever read. Because self-destruction does not always or even often look like gross self-indulgence. More often, it can look like we are seeking after good things. Do any of these sound familiar?:

- When we protect ourselves by responding to the world as if a threat was always around the corner, so instead of putting ourselves out there, taking risks, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, we choose stillness, paralysis, passivity. When what we call humility or patience is really just a life lived in fear. When the world never experiences your full self, or the gifts you have to give to the world, because you're holding back, for fear that you will be rejected, for fear it will do you harm.
- When the anger we feel, even and especially the righteous indignation we feel, makes it so that we can't see another person. When righteous indignation makes you see someone only as this one-dimensional caricature, a stick-person, without history or experience. When we cast someone aside because, after all, they're just like all the rest of them, clueless and deluded. It is hard for me to read Hochschild's deep story and not feel, at least a hint, of this type of dehumanizing anger.
- When we attempt to relieve the pain or woundedness of our lives with anything but God. When we believe that there is something out there that will satisfy our deep longing: a job, a promotion, a spending spree, a drink, the approval of our

parents or children or spouse. When we trade the messiness of connection and the mystery of faith for objects that we can collect and use and manipulate.

This list can go on and on. Our woundedness masks itself in countless forms. It sometimes looks like virtue, like when we exhaust and diminish ourselves in the name of love for someone else; when we hide or give up in the name of self-sacrifice; when our wokeness diminishes other people in our eyes. We act out of our brokenness without realizing it. It's so subtle and slight, so multifaceted, complex, and debatable, I find it hard sometimes to imagine anything else, any other way of being in this world.

So too, did that man on the cross, when "One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding [Jesus] and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'"

This fall, we have been exploring what it means to live a Eucharistic life, what it means to be fed at this table week after week. Looking back, I wonder, how has this table changed you? How has it changed our community? Have we really let it nourish us and challenge us?

I wonder, do you remember this table when you get caught up in these ways of being that tear at your humanity? When your job, or your closest relationships, or your very body or mind or heart tell you that you are not enough, and you fall into those old patterns of resentment or jealousy, terror or rage, sadness and stillness? In those quiet moments when you are alone and you're tempted to whisper things to yourself you'd never dare tell even a casual acquaintance: I'm a failure; I should be ashamed; I've let them down? In those moments, come back to the table, and remember: this body broken for you – Christ's rejection of the old ways of domination; this blood shed for you – Christ's claiming through it all that you are a child of God. Breadcrumbs. Christ left us this meal as a way to turn back to him, to one another, to that endless fountain of love and grace that surrounds us wherever we go. Because when we eat this bread,

and we drink this cup, together, in Jesus's name, we remember, and we proclaim the Christ who showed us a different way to be together, a way of love more powerful than might, a way of care more powerful than death.

“But the other [man crucified beside Jesus, rebuked the one who was mocking him], saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?...This man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ [Jesus] replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” This man, even at the end of his life on the cross, saw in Jesus a different way of life. He saw that faith was more powerful even than all the dehumanizing instruments that empire could inflict upon him.

Like him, this fall, we have caught a glimpse of a new way, a glimpse of the Eucharistic life. A path of grace instead of judgment, a path of love instead of shame. In this meal, recognize yourself as a child of God. Recognize those around you as the children of God. In this meal, find your place in the very body of Christ, loose in this world. For in it, Christ is showing us a new way of being in this world, and thus we proclaim the saving death of the resurrected Lord, until he comes again. Amen.