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Date: July 17, 2016
Sermon Title: Prescription for America
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Jeremiah 8 (*paraphrased*)

Deacon: "Let the bones of everybody be dug up, desecrated, and be like garbage lying on the ground, because this is an evil nation."

People: "God says, 'I don't get it!' Usually, people who fall down get back up. When people make a wrong turn, they turn around. Heck, even birds know how to correct course! But not these people. They like going in the wrong direction!"

Deacon: "Everybody thinks they're so smart, so exceptional, so above it all. But they reject their God, and prefer their own advice. Gimme, gimme, gimme — that's all they say. All they want is more, more, more."

People: "Seriously, I don't know if they're stupid, or blind, or evil! Even when something is hurting, they dress the wound like it's no big deal, they just cover it up. They're flip and glib, they cheer for "peace" but do nothing to achieve it."

Deacon: "They have no shame. They don't even know how to blush. There's not a humble bone in their body."

People: "What would get your attention? What would wake you up? No goodies? No booze? No basics? No peace? What?"

Deacon: "How about snakes, and vipers, how about terror? The snorting of the enemy's horses headed our way to devour everything?"

Alida: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a foundation of tears! I would weep day and night for my people."

ALL: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wound of my people?"

Let me say a brief word about today's sermon. Our world, 2016, is a troubling and troubled place. And today's sermon may trouble you in parts. You've often heard me say my favorite word is "provocative." I like anything that provokes me, you, to think: art, music, books, a play, this sermon. Provoke, not irritate, not annoy, not condemn. Provoke. Thinking.

Furthermore, as your pastor, as your preacher, my job is to preach the Gospel, not opinion. A sermon is not supposed to be my op-ed piece. I must aim to preach the Good News, even when it's about bad news.

You all know the huge Broadway musical hit, "Hamilton." Its top stars left last week, including the wonderful Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote the musical and played Hamilton. His replacement is another young Puerto Rican Brooklyn boy, Javier Muñoz. And *The New York Times* asked him about his love of the theater. Listen to what he had to say: "I just fell in love with the idea that theater can be a mirror, theater can be a commentary, theater can start a conversation that needs to happen." (Paulson, Michael. "A Word With: Javier Muñoz, the New Hamilton on Broadway." *The New York Times* 11 July 2016: C11. Print.) He's right, that's why Alida and I go to the theater. I want it to hold a mirror up to life, people, issues. I want its comments to be a commentary, to say something. And I want to get folks talking.

Well, just substitute the word "Church" for "theater." "Church" can be a mirror. Church can be a commentary. Church can start the conversation that needs to happen. So this morning, my sermon is going to be a mirror. God and I will offer some commentary to get you talking.

I hope you got that juxtaposition, that contrast. Jeremiah is discouraged and discouraging. Speaking for God, he describes a nation in crisis, headed for disaster; a people who have lost their way, sold their souls, and come up empty. Jeremiah was a doom-and-gloom, Debbie-Downer, the-sky-is-falling kind of guy. And at the end of the chapter, full of despair, almost hopeless, he offers a plaintive cry, "Is there no balm in Gilead, *is there no balm in Gilead?*" Something soothing, healing, restorative, something to make us better, get us back on our feet? (Jeremiah 8:22)

It may have been uncomfortable for you to say some of those words or hear our Junior Deacon say them, but let's not be surprised. I am a news junkie *and* a political junkie, and I think I'm on solid ground when I say every single candidate out there, not just the final two still standing, but all the others in the hunt, I think they all paint a pretty dismal picture of America. They, we, all wonder, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" But then Michael sang

that stirring solo, that old-time Gospel hymn, that declarative statement, "There is a balm in Gilead":

*Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

This hymn emerged from deep within the black experience. Everything America's harshest critics and worst pessimists now fear about America, African-Americans knew firsthand. Terror, fear, loss, betrayal. This old, old song has roots in the Jim Crow era, back to the pre-Civil War days in the slave fields. Back farther even, as Christians wrestled with good and evil.

Even Edgar Allen Poe used it in his poem, "The Raven":

*"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—*

*Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."*

No, "no balm in Gilead," quoth the critics, quoth the haters, the Islamic terrorists, the racists, the cop killers, the naysayers, the dividers.

*"Is there NO balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."*

That's why we're here, that's why we have this Church and a Christ and an old, old song that proclaims "There is a balm in Gilead." There is a hope, a salvation, and a "healing of the sin-sick soul, healing the wounded whole." "Is there a balm in Gilead?" The world implores, our neighbors implore. "Yes," quoth this Church, "evermore." Jeremiah wasn't the last prophet. There are still people in every age who have their ears attuned to God and try to tell us what they hear.

Whenever we discuss modern-day prophets, certain names are always mentioned: Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa.

I'd include David Brooks, *The New York Times* columnist, PBS commentator, popular author.

He wrote recently "The social fabric is tearing across this country, but everywhere it seems healers are rising up to repair their small piece of it. They are going into hollow places and creating community, building intimate relationships that change lives one by one.

"I know everybody's in a bad mood about the country. But the more time you spend in the hardest places, the more amazed you become." (Brooks, David. "A Nation of Healers." *The New York Times* 21 June 2016: 25. Print.)

He nails it. Two statements that tell what a mess we are. And two prescriptions for America: "The social fabric across America is tearing." Yes. "Everybody's in a bad mood," about the country, yes. But "... [there] are healers rising up to repair their small piece of it." Yes. "*Healers rising up to repair their small piece of it.*" That's right. And equally true, "the more time you spend in the hardest places, the more amazed you become." I read that exactly while 235 of our Church were in the "hollow places" of West Virginia, in the "hard places," in the flood disaster in Greenbrier County, "healers rising up to repair their small piece of it."

The last month in America has highlighted most of those tears in our fabric, our hard places. From the Orlando terrorist attack to the death of young black men to the Dallas police assassinations, it's all there: Islamic terrorism, police brutality, gun violence, racial hatred, mental illness, Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans, and just over the horizon, Paris, Nice, Istanbul. In Orlando an Islamic terrorist, clearly mentally ill, homophobic, conflicted about his own sexuality, radicalized on the Internet, destroys 50 families. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and St. Paul, Minnesota, two young black men killed by police, videotaped in living color, as blood and lives ebbed away.

In Dallas an Afghanistan War veteran, a young black man, carefully killed five white policeman, two of them Iraq War veterans, a horror fueled by some combination of despair, rage, and hate. These are our new "hard places," the newest "tears in our fabric."

Our response? As always, yes, as always, patriotism soars, faith comforts, differences are set aside, Scriptures take a deeper on meaning. President Obama and President Bush used the words of Jesus, St. Paul, Ezekiel to guide us toward hope; generosity abounds: the children of the dead will be well taken care of, monuments will be funded.

David Brooks says the results are amazing when we go into the hardest places. We'll see. Because the hardest place isn't just where people are killed. The *hardest* hardest place is when we try to talk about it afterward.

You watch, whenever these awful things happen: Orlando, Sandy Hook, Dallas, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, the first shout we hear is, "Don't politicize this!" Really? Do we know what "politics" means? From the original, it means "of the people, pertaining to the people." Politics is the business of the people. We've let it mean just government or partisan, party, but it exists only for you and me, "we, the people."

When 50 young, innocent, joyful gay people are murdered by an Islamic terrorist, that is definitely "of the people, pertaining to the people." It is a matter of consequence to us, the people. When five heroic, dedicated policemen are murdered by an Afghanistan War veteran filled with race hatred, armed to the teeth, that's political, that pertains to us. When vacations in Nice, tourists in Istanbul, citizens in Paris, children in Sandy Hook, young black men in Chicago and St. Paul are killed, that is "of the people."

Do we want answers? Or only answers we like? When we go to the doctor's office, are we looking for answers, no matter what? Do we go to the doctor's office demanding to get in and out as fast as possible? Or, are we looking to get better? Maybe a checkup. Maybe a blood test. Maybe an MRI. Maybe surgery or chemo or radiation. Maybe physical therapy. The more serious the problem, the more likely it will be all of those: Look at this. Look at that. Try this or that. Until we're O.K. We want to be better.

Of course, when we say, "Don't politicize," what we really mean is, "Don't touch *my* favorite issue." Some people want to talk race but not police; police but not Islam; Islam but not guns; guns but not mental illness. So we go after certain issues with a vengeance but protect our pet issues from being confronted. Could this approach be any sillier? Don't we want answers?

When I was a young athlete, we had a trainer; Red was his name. And when I went to his office, he had a great big tub of something called "Hot Stuff." Bright orange, gooey, messy, smelly, stained everything it touched permanently, and burned like heck forever. But it worked. Sore arms, bum knees, twisted ankles—it burned like heck, but it worked. *Hot Stuff*. My fear is that America doesn't want the "hot stuff." We don't want something that burns, that's unpleasant. We prefer a Band-Aid. We want "take two pills and call me in the morning."

Let's look at Jesus for a moment. In his Sermon on the Mount, he tackles two of the biggest issues in human experience: killing and adultery. Up until Jesus, the standard answer to both was, "Don't." "Don't kill." "Don't commit adultery." But all the don'ts in the world don't stop either one. Well, Jesus could've just shouted louder instead of "Thou shalt not kill." He could say, "THOU SHALT NOT KILL." But Jesus knew that louder wasn't the answer. He needed to get to the bottom of it, the core, the roots. So he said, "You know the law, 'thou shalt not kill'? I tell you, don't be angry." "You know you're not to commit adultery, right? But I tell you, don't LUST."

Jesus could see what was tearing the fabric of society, but he knew killing and adultery were the real issues. The real issues, the prescription, the balm, the "hot stuff" that would get to the root of the problem was to tackle our angers, and our lusts, our favorite things that are out of control. Truth is, most of us, most of the time, we like our angers, we like our lusts. Just as we like our guns, we like our prejudices, we like our opinions; don't bother me with facts, don't make me uncomfortable.

There are always some of us or some powerful lobby or some interest group or some partisan who says we can't talk guns or we can't talk Islamic terrorism or we can't talk racism or armor-piercing bullets or mental illness or some other issue close to us.

When we want to insult people's intelligence, we'll say, "They can't walk and chew gum at the same time!" What we're saying is they can't do two things at once, they can't think along two concurrent lines, they can't hold complex thoughts together in their heads. I think we as Americans think one another are dumb. We can't walk and chew gum at the same time. We can't talk about guns and terror or race and police or police and mental illness or Islam and whatever. We are always putting the thing we're against on the table and keeping our favorites *off* the table.

The heart patient walks into the doctor's office and says, "Don't tell me lose weight." The cancer patient says, "Don't tell me to stop smoking." The abusive spouse says, "Don't tell me to stop drinking." In my life, I've sat with hundreds and hundreds of alcoholics, and 99 percent of them, the first words out of their mouths are, "Don't tell me to go to AA." I've sat with many hundreds of people seeking something "spiritual." And their first words are, "Don't talk to me about Church." And with hundreds, even thousands of people in need, when I start to press, the first thing they say is, "Don't ask me about that." People are always taking answers off the table, questions off the table. They don't want to get too close, go too deep. Keep it on the surface, keep it safe.

Now, listen to me, I'm *not* saying, "Don't be afraid of the question," or "don't be afraid of the answers." When we're not feeling well over a long period of time, and we've tried all the easy stuff, and we finally go to a specialist, we *are* afraid of the questions, and we *are* afraid of the answers. *But* the only way to healing *is* to ask the questions and listen to the answers.

I'm almost done, but I haven't touched a raw nerve yet, so let me touch a raw nerve: Guns. Armor-piercing bullets in particular. The Second Amendment. The gun debate. The Dallas executioner of the five police officers used armor-piercing bullets, and some of the cops were killed through their armor. Now, I see three uses for armor-piercing bullets: hunting rhinoceroses in your backyard, killing cops, and killing soldiers. And yet, as a nation, we can't agree to put armor-piercing bullets on the table. Half of the country, the "people," won't talk about it.

After 9/11, I was invited to preach in a mosque, and I said to the Muslims, "You need to clean up the garbage in your own backyard. Just as I have to clean up the garbage in my backyard. Because if you don't, someone else will come in and do it." That's my message to Muslims and all the other stakeholders and interest groups in our national debate. The gun lobby, the police, Black Lives Matter, advocates for the mentally ill. Immigration. Tolerance. Our political parties. Start cleaning up the garbage in your own backyard. Whoever wants a say in our national debate, clean up.

Let's not be afraid of one another. Let's not be afraid of ideas. Let's not be silenced of our questions or answers. The Bible says, "Perfect love drives out fear." We need a large dose of that "perfect love." That "*is* the balm in Gilead." We Christlike people, we are imperfect Americans, imperfect Christians, imperfect people. For us, our perfection is in Christ. That's how we can face the questions *and* the answers. That's why I know I can talk about anything with you because of the love deep in our Church.

On Public Radio, they asked a New York City preacher what she was preaching on this Sunday. She said, "Prophetic grief, Revolutionary love." "Prophetic grief." That's where we began today with Jeremiah, weeping, his heart breaking for his nation, his faith at a loss, asking doubtfully, "Is there any balm in Gilead?" Believing the Raven, quoth, "Nevermore." That's "Prophetic grief." And we have that.

But we also have "Revolutionary love," a love that turns the status quo upside down, a radical love that changes the landscape, that redraws boundaries, that overwhelms enemies, that destroys fear. That, quoth our Church, is forevermore.

Let's stand and sing the great hymn No. 501, "There Is A Balm in Gilead."

*There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Sometimes I feel discouraged,
and think my work's in vain,
but then the Holy Spirit
revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*If you cannot preach like Peter,
if you cannot pray like Paul,
you can tell the love of Jesus,
and say "He died for all!"
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*

*Don't ever feel discouraged,
for Jesus is your friend;
and if you lack for knowledge
he'll ne'er refuse to lend.
There is a balm in Gilead
to make the wounded whole;
there is a balm in Gilead
to heal the sin-sick soul.*